

# **FINDING MY WAY**

## **Memoirs and short stories**



**by Peter Deadman**

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# INTRODUCTION

This is a partial story of my life. In the chapters I have written, I don't hold back. However I decided early on not to share intimate details of my closest relationships to avoid embarrassments, though I'm sure my wife, children and grandchildren will find quite enough to embarrass them here.

I am now a stable member of my community with some reasonable achievements to my name. I specialise in teaching and writing about health and wellbeing, but as you will see if you read this memoir, it was not always so. When I was younger, I was often wild, directionless, hedonistic, risk-taking and selfish, though I got most of that over with by my early twenties. I also had a really fantastic time.

Like most of us, I was driven by forces I didn't understand. Some were personal and some were in response to the cultural explosion of the 1960s and 70s that gave birth to so many of the great social movements that resonate today – feminism, black and gay rights, environmentalism, sexual freedom and more. Though that period is part of my story and therefore still seems fresh to me, it is of course a long time ago. For that reason, my account may be of interest as a historical document – a way of understanding how different those times were. I had great opportunities, immense freedom and the feeling that I was part of unstoppable social changes. While there was a lot to protest about and a lot to try and change, many of us had real optimism that the world could be made a better place. I realise that for many young people today, the future seems much darker.

As I relived some of the episodes in this memoir, I thought (not for the first time) that though we think of our life as one continuous flow, it often feels like a series of quite separate lives, linked by the most tenuous of threads. So the answer to the question 'was that really me that did that?' has to be answered yes, no, maybe.

A few years ago I took a two-year creative writing course at Sussex University. Out of that came a number of short stories and I have included these in part two of this book. Many are linked to life experiences I write about in part one and I indicate where this is so.

I don't regret any moment of the adventures recounted here. They weren't always enjoyable and some were hard indeed, but above all they were adventures – and that is what I craved. However, I do regret the times I wasn't kinder, more understanding and less self-centred. Like many people, I think,

I only truly learned to love unconditionally once my children were born, and I only learned to understand myself better as I reached middle age.

One thing I do believe, however, is that through these adventures, I have always been trying to find my own way and become more truly myself.

*Peter Deadman, 2020*

## 6. EARNING A LIVING

After leaving school, in-between my various travels and before I found my vocation in life, I tried my hand at a variety of jobs.

### *Library assistant*

Age 17, I got my first job at Beckenham Public Library and I loved it. First of all, I was getting a regular pay packet and I felt rich. Second, I was surrounded by books. I can still remember the moment, aged four, when I learned to read. I was sitting with my mother looking at a book about fire engines when the words suddenly came into focus and made sense and before long I'd read all the books in infants' school. By the time I started at the library, I was deep into European classics, especially Russian. I've tried to go back to the ones that I loved the most – Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* - but I don't seem to have the patience and stamina that I did then. The only exceptions are the extraordinary, nightmarish *Crime and Punishment*, and *Anna Karenina* which I've read over and over.

Working in a library is a worthy and important job, I was told, and we were there to serve our community. Not that they were especially discerning when it came to reading. The most common requests were for 'a good thriller', or 'a cracking biography - you know film stars or musicians', and above all - and only if they were women - 'a lovely romance'. I enjoyed sitting at the counter crisply stamping books with their return date, as well as mastering the arcane Dewey Decimal classification system ("I think you'll find that in 632: Plant Injuries, Diseases and Pests"). Nowadays I go into bookshops at my peril since I rarely come out without buying at least one, like a wine lover who hoards more bottles than they'll ever be able to drink in their lifetime. But working in the library, I never needed to buy a book and like the *Hungry Caterpillar* I read my way through the shelves. I fell in love with young adult literature, something that has stayed with me. Though I was old for them, I read all of the Narnia books (somehow without realising their Christian message) and of course *The Lord of the Rings*. Many years later I wrote my own young adult novel (*Juice*) though it never reached the publication stage. I heard some YA authors discussing their work on the radio and they all agreed they'd never lost their inner teenager – that acutely special, confusing, hopeful, fresh, alive time of life.

### *The factory*

After I was thrown out of university I went back to my parents' home. They thought I must be mentally ill – such a good student at school and now to suffer the indignity of being one of the few students ever to be kicked out of Sussex University. My mother dragged me to see our GP – a family doctor of the old type who had looked after my brother and me through measles and chicken pox and everything else. He diagnosed depression and though I didn't believe him at the time, I took the amitriptyline he prescribed and went to sleep for ten days, just waking long enough to eat.

When I stopped sleeping I felt different. I wanted to do something and I started taking apart an old motorbike. I cleaned and greased every part, however small, put it all back together and painted the frame fire engine red. Funnily enough I only ever rode it once, though when I later applied for a film extra union card I included motor bike skills as one of my qualifications.

I started looking for a job so I could earn enough to go travelling and, with my fingernails still black with machine oil, applied to a small engineering factory. The boss knew I wasn't going to be there for life but chose to believe me, out of a mix of amusement and curiosity, when I told him I was willing to dedicate a few years to him. It was noisy and smelled of hot steel and grease but the work was easy enough and my fellow workers tolerated me. The factory was barely automated and I spent most of my days placing small thin disks of steel into a slot and drilling out their centres to make washers. My workmates sang along to Radio One belting out Tom Jones ("My, my, my, Delilah, Why, why, why, Delilah) as I swept the swarf and filth from around their lathes and drills and presses. I wasn't there long – just until I had saved enough money to get by on.

### *Painting a church*

G. and I were living in a one room flat above a bakery on the Fulham Road in London. She was the first girl I'd ever lived with. Seeing her make-up on the shelf, her dresses and hats in the wardrobe and her underwear drying in the bathroom, along with regular sex, felt like Christmas. I had one brother and went to an all-boys' school so I didn't really know any girls till I was sixteen. I'd had a few girlfriends before G. but this was what I wanted – a real, steady, settling-in kind of relationship.

We'd got together one night at UFO, the underground club in Tottenham Court Road. I'd gone there with Connie, whom I'd met in Spain on my over-

land trip to Israel. We'd met up again in London but we'd now got to the point where neither of us really wanted to be with each other and she disappeared with someone else early in the evening.

G. was the girlfriend of one of my best friends, but after we took a little speed, that didn't seem to matter any more. We danced and flirted all night and ended up in her room as the morning sun struck the crystals swaying in the open window, playing kaleidoscopic rainbows over the bed. When we made love, it was like it had been ordained, better than anything I'd ever experienced before. They say the dynamics of a relationship are laid down in the first twenty-four hours. My friend was badly hurt by our betrayal and I went on to be repaid in kind, suffering the intense pain of jealousy when I discovered that G. had cheated on me.

But this was our early days. We got high, dressed up and went to underground clubs at weekends, jiggling around to Soft Machine, Pink Floyd and Arthur Brown amid the strobes and liquid swirling lights. She wore her tiny dresses, a floppy hat and a boa while I was draped in beads and finery. Sunday mornings we bought croissants and lay in bed amidst the crumbs. Weekday evenings we cooked and I felt like a married man.

G. worked in Biba's first shop in Kensington and I used to sit there, waiting for her to finish her shift, surrounded by girls trying on dresses, hats and scarves. She had a regular pay packet and I badly needed a job to pay my share of rent, tobacco and food - the smells rising from bakery making me hungry all the time. Every day I went through the jobs vacant pages in the *London Evening Standard*, wondering if I had what it took to be an estate agent's assistant or office temp.

Then one day I saw this ad: YOUNG PEOPLE WANTED TO PAINT CHURCH

I'd done a bit of decorating for my Dad and liked the idea of painting around the stained glass windows and marble statues inside a cool building smelling of old stone and wilting flowers.

There were five of us waiting outside the locked door of a massive church close to Regent's Park when Mr (or was it Major?), Hudson appeared - tweed jacket, short, clipped and no nonsense. We were young and long-haired and he talked to us like we were fresh cadets. If I wasn't an anarchist I'd have saluted. He said he'd persuaded the Parish Board to let him get the outside of the church painted faster and cheaper than any professional decorating company.

A cold wind whipped around our feet as we craned our necks up to the unpainted parapet where pigeons roosted high above London, and then even higher to the bell tower. He told us he'd hired sixty foot (18 metre) ladders and how quick and easy the job would be. But in reality we were his young, expendable troops and it was pretty clear he wasn't going to lead the way into enemy fire.

The ladders were made of wood and so heavy it took three of us to raise each one. Climbing nervously to the top, we left the streets of London, the cafes, buses and taxis, the noise, far below and entered a new world where the wind blew fierce, the ladders shifted and creaked in tune with our trembling, the disturbed pigeons squawked and flapped in our faces, and we hoped we'd live long enough to slap cream paint on the dirty stone and encrusted pigeon droppings and get down as fast as humanly possible. In the face of our shared fear, we bonded rapidly, and it was only the trench-happy camaraderie that brought us back the next morning.

Mr (or was it Major?) Hudson hustled up to us on our second day as we were on our tea break (fried egg sandwich, sugared tea and a couple of roll up cigarettes for me) for a serious word. People had been finding splashes of cream paint on the tops of their cars and they weren't happy. The Parish Board wasn't happy either. You need to take more care, he said. He'd been in Marks & Spencer's that morning and watched some painters working there. They hadn't spilled a drop. We didn't say anything, just looked at him, wondering if he couldn't see the difference between carefully stroking paint onto flat walls in the comfort of a warm shop and climbing to the crow's nest in a howling gale as the ship rocked beneath us.

On the way back to the Fulham Road, sitting on the tube, hair and face caked in paint, I felt glad to be alive yet already dreading the next day.

It must have been around day five that the ladder came down. We were on our tea break again, joking about something, when we heard a scraping sound, quiet at first, then louder and louder, a long breath-holding, silence and then an enormous crash.

We rushed outside to see that one of the ladders had fallen and crushed a car (the vicar's it turned out) like it was made of tinfoil. As we stood there, a couple of guys in hard hats ran over from the building site across the road.

"We've been waiting for that to happen. We've had bets on it. How could you not know about tying ladders?"

"Tying?"

"Up top, whenever you go that high in the wind and all, you've got to tie the



ladder onto something every time. We thought you were crazy”.

Like with Mr (or was it Major?) Hudson we didn't say anything, but if we had it would have been along the lines of “why didn't you bloody come over and warn us days ago?”

### ***British museum***

After the church, and still in need of money, I applied for a safer job at the British Museum. The interview went well. Either the modest and elderly interviewer liked me or he just had a kind nature. He didn't ask much (my A levels and previous library work satisfied him from the off) but waxed lyrical about the pension plan as I nodded enthusiastically. I supposed at his age it loomed large. Almost in passing, just as I was leaving, he asked if I liked maps. I said no.

A couple of weeks later I opened a letter telling me to report to the map department the following Monday.

I felt a thrill climbing the stone steps and walking beneath the Greek pediment into the museum, and an even greater one when I was given a key that unlocked the secret doors disguised as book cases, confirming my status as one of the elite who worked in the bowels of the place. The walk to the canteen for my precious tea and lunch breaks took me past the Assyrian winged lions and, if I had time, I'd slip into the British Library (this was before its move to King's Cross) to thrill myself with a peek at Shakespeare first folios and the scrawl of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Keats' *Ode to Autumn*.

This special feeling lasted until the third day. By then the tedium of the map department had begun to seep into my pores. Like Theodore Roethke, I saw “dust from the walls of institutions, finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica, sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium”<sup>2</sup>.

My task, fastidiously explained to me, was to revise the card file system that listed every map in the collection. I had to mark the cards with occult signs - three squiggly red lines if it was on display, two straight blue ones if in store, different coloured asterisks according to which continent the map pictured and so on, endlessly. On the fourth day I found it hard to get up and was late. Then again two days later. The third time, I was summoned to the office. My boss, seemed genuinely puzzled, even hurt, and asked with immense politeness if I was having any problems.

I always dressed more carefully than usual for the job. I especially favoured a multi-coloured striped shirt I'd recently bought and which I thought I looked pretty good in. I wasn't surprised when, after a week and a half, I was

called back to the office and fired. She seemed bitter when she told me that I'd been late five times – what could I say - but I was seriously offended when she started on about my shirt, spitting out, “and you even come to work in your pyjamas”.

### *Road sweeper*

I was only a road sweeper for a couple of weeks but I liked it. I was assigned to the quiet leafy avenues on the outer fringes of suburban Beckenham and introduced to my team – a half a dozen gentle men who'd been doing the job for years. Slow and easy, they kept telling me, and I soon slipped into their pattern of effortlessly sweeping the wide broom along the pavement and road as one of us followed with the dust cart. Despite my youth, within a few days I was appointed gang leader, presumably because of my greater educational attainments, but none of them seemed to mind. The best moments were when we fanned out across a quiet road like the Magnificent Seven, sweeping the dirt out of town. They seemed genuinely sad when I told them I wouldn't see them again as I was off to Morocco – or somewhere.

### *Plongeur*

After one of my travels, I ended up in Brighton and needed to find work. I'd read George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* and though it wasn't his intention, was inspired by the proletarian honesty of being a plongeur (washer up). So I took on washing up the teas and suppers in a hotel. I

### *Dolor by Theodor Roethke*

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,  
 Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper weight,  
 All the misery of manilla folders and mucilage,  
 Desolation in immaculate public places,  
 Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,  
 The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher,  
 Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,  
 Endless duplication of lives and objects.  
 And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,  
 Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,  
 Sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,  
 Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,  
 Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

had a routine. Before heading to work at 4pm I would smoke a joint. Then I'd sit luxuriously among the mountains of cake-smearred plates, teapots full of leaves, dirty cups, saucers, spoons and knives, and, like in my grandmother's house in front of the coal range, make toast. I'd lavish it with butter and marmalade and consume slice after slice (I wasn't getting enough to eat at home) accompanied by a giant pot of strong tea. Then, rocket-fuelled, I'd wash out giant, gravy-caked pots and greasy pans full of congealed beef and lamb fat and scrub, dry and stack crockery, till 1pm without a break.

### ***Hospital porter***

I worked briefly - actually most of my jobs were brief - as a porter in a small hospital in Hove. I wheeled patients to surgery, x-ray or blood tests, brought unconscious ones back from surgery, and once took a well wrapped amputated leg down to the incinerator in the basement.

### ***Painter and decorator***

Back in London I got taken on by a decorating firm. I was only there for one job but it went on for weeks. It was a housing estate in Vauxhall made up of dozens of identical flats. We'd paint the outside windows and doors on fine days and the insides on rainy days. All the other painters were Irish.

Painting and decorating is probably the least skilful of the trades and the least respected but, like everything, it has its own artistry. I learned how to wield a wide emulsion brush all day long with strong and elastic wrists; how to store oil paint brushes in water during breaks and at the end of the day so they only needed cleaning when the job was finished; how to 'cut in' - sweeping the brush down the putty without getting any on the glass, and how to get more of the paint on the walls than on myself. But I didn't take up my workmates' habit of drinking pint after pint of beer every night and coming into work hung-over and nauseous.

The best bit of the job was lunch - the same every day. Eggs, bacon, chips, fried tomatoes, fried bread and mushrooms and a couple of mugs of strong sweet tea, followed by a roll-up and a read of the *Daily Mirror*.

Even after I started eating natural and organic food, once in a while - especially when I was doing hard manual work - I'd treat myself to a fry-up, right until the English café more or less disappeared from the streets of Brighton. It could cheer up my darkest moods and celebrate my sunniest ones.

### *Drug dealer*

Early in 1969, age 20, I was living in Tulse Hill in South London. I'd started eating health food – things like wheat germ and muesli – and learning yoga from a book. I had a bedsitting room (bed, cooker and sink) and my friend Mick and my ex-girlfriend Mary lived next door. Mary – a pre-Raphaelite beauty – had been my first lover but, young and foolish, I had taken her for granted. I look back now with tenderness and regret that I was such an ill-educated and careless boyfriend.

I was mostly unemployed but happy enough. Saturdays I used to take the bus into Brixton and shop in the West Indian market for strange vegetables that I didn't know how to cook.

One day I went to North London to visit a friend from University – someone I'd last seen sitting on the carpet in the midst of a tornado-strewn room, thirty hours without sleep, rummaging through every scrap of paper and rubbish for the hundredth time in search of a packet of heroin he was convinced was hidden somewhere.

I met his sister Sue there and spent the night in her West Hampstead flat – a one-night stand that went on for weeks. Sue was a beautiful, sharp, North London Jewish girl and I was always just a little bit afraid of her. She had a business selling flared velvet trousers and I was quickly seduced by her hippie chic lifestyle. We went to clubs and parties, spent Saturdays roaming through Portobello Road market buying finery, and smoked a lot of dope.

Her entrepreneurial bent had already led her into small scale dealing and before long I'd slipped into it with her. With the two of us encouraging each other, the business grew and soon we were buying one pound weights of either Lebanese hash or African grass. Our suppliers were cool and laconic West Indian guys who within twenty minutes of a discreet phone call would turn up in ankle length black leather coats and sunglasses to deliver the goods. We'd sit on the floor, weighing it out into half ounce and ounce packs (14/28 grams) and then sell them to a wide array of customers – first friends, then friends of friends, then eventually, strangers.

Once a week I'd put on a brown double-breasted suit that I'd bought in Swinging London's Carnaby Street and catch the Pullman train from Victoria Station to Brighton. I'd tuck a brown carrier bag full of my wares beneath my seat and, like P. G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster, tuck in to a kipper breakfast delivered to my table by a uniformed waiter. My friend Steve would meet me on his Triumph Bonneville motorbike and drive me from customer

to customer, always staying long enough for a smoke and a gossip with old friends.

Steve loved his bike with a passion but he was a swift-thinking pragmatist. We were sitting one afternoon in a friend's house in Clarence Square, when someone knocked on the door with a stricken expression and told Steve a lorry had just reversed over his bike. He leapt up, shouted "gimme a hammer", and started smashing up what was left of the bike. Better to get insurance for a write-off than a long, drawn-out repair claim, he said.

For a short spell the dealing felt very sophisticated and I loved the feeling of money in my pocket. But then things started to turn bad. Strangers would appear in the street late at night, yelling up to our second floor window and demanding weed. This was a time when possession of even a small amount could mean a jail sentence and - for what we usually had lying around - that could be several years. More and more often I'd be stricken by fits of paranoia in the middle of the night and - in an inverted version of Sue's brother - rummage through the flat hopelessly trying to collect up and dispose of all the spliffs from ashtrays and the packets of weed lying on tables, in drawers and even under the bed - terrified that we would be raided at any moment.

Sue and I weren't getting on, things were spinning out of control and I realised I was on a downward path of self-destruction. One day I just left, barely saying goodbye, and when I got back to my room in Tulse Hill I wept with relief. I felt like Mole in *Wind in the Willows* who'd walked out of his happy home at the first whiff of Spring and, like a faithless lover, only realised what he'd lost just in time to rescue it.

### ***Film artiste***

I'd moved back to Brighton, living a hand-to-mouth life, cadging from friends, even going hungry at times. Then I heard something wonderful. They were making a film - *Oh What a Lovely War* - and they needed hundreds of soldiers. Not only was film extra work paid better than any I'd ever done, but they fed you all day long. Even more, they had to give everyone a precious Film Artistes Association membership. Normally, you needed a union card to get work but you'd never get a card without having work in the first place. Catch-22.

I was so keen that I even cut my shoulder-length hair to First World War squaddie stubble. For days we lounged around in scratchy khaki uniforms and ate and ate from the mobile canteens. Every so often we'd line up in ranks to sing Pack up Your Troubles (in Your Old Kit Bag) and Oh, Oh, Oh

### What a Lovely War.

Soon after that, I got a day's work on a Roger Moore movie. It was just one scene. I was a demonstrator trying to push through lines of police. It felt just like a real demo and got pretty rough, with the police extras as determined to stop us as we were to break through. How easy to manipulate people with roles and uniforms.

*Carry on Camping* was the proud swansong of my film career. For those who don't know, the Carry On films – part of many older Brits' childhood – were cheaply made, rough and ready films, full of bad jokes and infused with that typically 1950s British innuendo that makes sex seem ridiculous and mundane. But they are much loved, mostly because of the extraordinary cast. It wasn't till I got on set that I realised how odd-looking, almost grotesque, they were in real life. String-thin Richard Hawtrey, obese Hattie Jacques, Sid James with a creviced face like a dried out mudflat, and tiny, bubbly, squeaky, perky, cockney, Barbara Windsor. The scene that everyone remembers is when her bikini top bounces off during a keep-fit class taught by sneery Kenneth Williams, although typically for Carry On, no breasts were seen in the film.

It was a different scene that terminated my film career. I was one of a bunch of hippies dancing in a field to a rock band. Horrified by the noise and the counter-culture threat, Hattie Jacques and Kenneth Williams drove round on a flatbed truck spraying us with water to drive us away. Actually it was barely a spray, more a light mist.

There's a lot of politics from the top to the bottom of the film industry and the lowly world of the extras was no exception. Anything above and beyond a basic extra role was due a bonus, in this case 'wet money'.

"They owe us," one guy shouted. "We're not working any more till we get it".

After a stand-off, the Film Artistes Association union rep was called in and an hour later he turned up in a dubious trilby hat and a crombie coat the same colour as his yellow, nicotine stained moustache.

"We'll soon get this mess sorted" he said as he disappeared into the director's caravan.

Some time later he reappeared, wobbling as he came down the caravan steps, and slurring his words. "No deal, sorry", he said – as trustable as a five ace pack.

"They've paid you off and you're drunk," our agitator shouted. "Everyone

who refuses to work come and make a stand with me” and he stomped off to the side, ready to man the barricades.

Five minutes later when it was still just him and me, the director said ‘You’re both fired’. As the Union rep took our precious cards back, I felt like Dreyfuss being drummed out of the French army, epaulettes ripped off, sword broken over my commander’s knee.

“You’ll never work in the film industry again”, the rep said.

He was right. I did apply and got a place at the London School of Film Technique with ambitions to become a director, but my local authority refused me a grant on the grounds that I’d wasted the money they’d given me to go to University [for UK students reading this, just a reminder that in those far-off golden days we received grants - fees and living expenses - and didn’t have to take loans that hung around our necks like millstones for ever after].

There was a small coda to *Carry On Camping*. I got a phone call the next morning. Clearly not yet informed that I was an ex-extra, a woman asked if I had a set of motorcycle leathers for Ringo Starr to wear in a movie that was shooting that day. It was Sunday, she said, and all the costumiers were closed. I briefly considered going to a café in Penge where I knew the bikers hung out but they were an intimidating lot and I decided discretion was the better part of valour and stayed at home.