Going to Sea in a Sieve
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Going to Sea in a Sieve
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

WEIDENFELD & NICOLSON
LONDON
To Teresa Guerrero Urbano and Ricard Simo.
And for my sister, Sharon.
In 1976 Steve Martin was making one of his first appearances on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson. At some point during the interview Steve began to do a few typically bizarre impressions of show-biz greats. In response, Johnny Carson said he could do only one impression and that was of his second-grade high school teacher, a Miss Vance, and nobody ever wanted to hear that. The audience begged to differ. Carson tried to move on but the clamour from the crowd grew louder until he turned in mock amazement and said, ‘You really want me to do my old high school teacher for you on national TV?’

The audience made it clear they did.

Clearing his throat, Johnny Carson then spoke in the strangulated whine of an old maid: ‘Now then, little Johnny Carson, you keep that up and it’s a spell in the old detention dumpster for you!’

The place immediately exploded in wild applause and deafening cheers.

During this tumultuous din Steve Martin recalled that Carson leaned across to him and said in his ear, ‘Sorry about that, but you stick around in show business long enough and eventually you’ll do everything you ever knew.’

So. Here goes …
Preface

I am seven years old and the car in which I sit is, by now, totally enveloped in flames. The old banger had had a good run. Ever since we had found it abandoned on our dump – in the 1960s, bombsites were called ‘dumps’ – we had been using it as a kind of base camp. Now, with its slashed front seats exposing clumps of horse-hair, together with the plywood tea chests we had squeezed into the rear after the seats were removed, it seemed to almost beg for a playful match. So we had all piled in, popped a Swan Vesta and declared whoever got out first was a coward and whoever stayed till last was the game’s winner. I know, I know. And kids these days make all that fuss about Nintendo.

On fire for about ten minutes now, it was clearly no longer a matter of when I should get out but whether I could get out. But I wasn’t moving. Not yet. Not me.

The tea chest in which I squatted was starting to give off thin wisps of smoke that foretold, any second now, it would probably go up in a huge fireball. Still I was determined to win. Besides, other than me, there was only Peter King left inside this blazing wreck and Kingy was certainly no champion when it came to a rattling good game of chicken like this. He would definitely lose his nerve before long – I mean, I had to believe that or what was the point of the whole exercise?

We looked at each other defiantly, head and shoulders poking up above the tin-lined edges of our tea chests, the flames now billowing along the roof of the rusted old vehicle, the smoke funnelling out through where once had been doors on the doomed Ford Popular. The thick plume billowed across the bombsite.

The front of the car had predictably gone up like a gasworks, disqualifying Tommy Hodges, Stephen Micalef and Tony Plumpton.
almost immediately as they panicked and leapt out, it seemed to me, prematurely. They hadn't lasted ten seconds. Now it was down to just Pete and me. And though I daren't show it, yes, I was beginning to find the growing inferno's repeated metallic bangs, pops and fizzes a tad alarming. Bit did he?

Of course what neither I nor Peter King, nor any of our half-dozen or so friends cheering us on from the relative safety of three feet away, had entertained for a moment was the idea that there might still be a petrol tank lurking within the old banger.

And it was growing fearsomely hot in there …
Mum preferred the term ‘maisonette’ but nobody else seemed to use the word. The truth is we – mum, dad, sister, brother and me – lived in a council flat: 11 Debnams Road, Rotherhithe, London, SE16. It was a completely fraudulent address, given that there were no numbers 1–10 in Debnams Road. There was barely a road. The turning, sitting around midway between Surrey Docks and the Old Kent Road in the borough of Bermondsey, was a hundred or so yards in length and comprised of nothing but an overgrown World War Two bombsite on one side and a monolithic mausoleum on the other. This was St Gertrude’s Church – just about the most featureless pile the Victorians ever consecrated.

Like Noël Coward’s Norfolk, St Gertrude’s was very flat; literally a dark solid brick wall with a door on it. You had to back away for several streets before you could see the cross on its roof and the building finally revealed its purpose. Otherwise you could be forgiven for thinking it was a workhouse or a prison. I don’t think there can be another church like St Gertrude’s; whatever glory is given to God by the design of St Paul’s Cathedral, St Gertrude’s certainly snatches it back again. In all the time I lived in Debnams Road – and we’re talking about the first twenty years of my life – I never saw a single wedding, funeral or exorcism team emerge from its portals. It was exactly the sort of functioning but forgotten outpost in a roughhouse area that, in comedy films of the period, a hapless priest played by Norman Wisdom or Brian Rix would be assigned to in order to get rid of them.

Debnams Road itself came to a sudden end at the lopsided metal gates of a shapeless yard the council used for storing things they
thought they might need later: mountains of empty paint tins, busted braziers, wooden pallets, concrete-encrusted wheelbarrows and various mysterious mounds covered by billowing tarpaulins. The whole ramshackle site was surrounded by a tall corrugated-iron fence – as if anybody would ever want to pinch any of its worthless waste.

Looming above all these splendours was the railway.

Raised up on hundreds of blackened Victorian arches, the railway was Bermondsey. Every pub, every school, every block of flats seemed to sit in its shadow and you were never more than a few yards from its grinding shriek and the smell of sparking. The arches themselves housed the sort of nefarious businesses later reduced to cliche by countless wide-boy TV crime series from *Minder* to *Only Fools and Horses*. There may have been some legitimate tax-paying concerns beavering away under the railway tracks, but most seemed busy repairing old motors while, simultaneously, right next door they would be breaking up identical models for yet-to-happen insurance claims.

People in the arches packed household goods, made lino, bundled old magazines, stockpiled scrap, wrapped oranges in tissue paper, melted metals, ran taxi firms, beat panels and swapped goldfish for old rags. They made toffee apples, restored furniture and rendered the flesh from animal bones. Another arch very near our home ‘made paint’. It only strikes me now that I have no idea how you make paint, or how such a huge national industry could possibly be added to by a couple of blokes in a railway arch in SE16. On summer days the fumes from that arch – mixed with various other ‘wavy lines’ emanating from the smelting vats within their neighbours’ caves – gave the local air a bracing caustic edge. On really busy days, the atmosphere would cause birds and light aircraft to plummet from the skies, while people sitting reading on balconies would have their newspapers spontaneously combust as the oxygen content was finally bested by the abundant nitromethane.

One of the arches, we later learned, housed the Richardson gang’s notorious torture barn. Really. The Richardsonsons were of course the Kray Brothers’ only rivals in the London underworld of the sixties.
When the Saints Go Marching In

I remember one night in 1965, walking home with my dad from a night match at Millwall. The game had ended about an hour before, but Dad was part of a boisterous little mob that liked to unwind with a few pints after a particularly testing fixture. Well, any fixture actually. Zampa Road, the narrow street that ran past the arches, was a favourite shortcut to the football ground; to this day it remains one of the last completely desolate locations in the whole of London, nothing more than a few scrapyards and some littered waste ground. There were no street lights along the route back then, and as we bus- tled along this always quiet, always edgy stretch we came upon a bottle-green Rover, parked half up on the pavement with its interior light on. On the back seat was a man, well dressed and wearing an overcoat, who looked to have fallen asleep, his head lolled back against the rear shelf of the car. His face, clear and spotlighted by the bulb above him, was totally plastered in fresh blood. He didn't seem to have any teeth, and blood was pulsing from his gums. My dad hustled me away as quickly as he could. I was babbling about ambulances, but the old man knew better. Our clattering footsteps had interrupted something, and lurking in the pitch-black shadows around us were people who required us to be gone. After dropping me at home, Dad, who had little fear in his make-up, went back for another look. He later told me that when he got to the spot, the car and its badly beaten passenger had vanished. It was many years later that I learned about the torture barn just beyond my bedroom window.

So where did we actually live? Where was this notional house number eleven in Debnams Road?

Well, if you walked past St Gertrude’s RC, keeping the bombsite and railway arches on your right, shortly before you got to the council yard gates there was a small opening flanked by cobblestones. Turn in here and you would be in a concrete square from which rose two blocks of flats built in the mid-1950s. The larger of the blocks was Gillam House, the smaller, Debnams Road. Even as a young child I always thought the council had been a little unimaginative when naming our flats. I mean they were off Debnams Road, they were
near Debnams Road, but a sane person might walk up and down Debnams Road itself and never find us. They could have called our little block Superman Villas or Elvis Presley Towers, but no. They couldn’t be bothered. Gillam House, on the other hand, was named after the infamous Judge Gillam who hanged more people than any magistrate in British history and was murdered by the outraged mother of his last victim in nearby Southwark Park. (Total poppycock, but that’s what we believed.)

And what was our life like in this noisy, dangerous and polluted industrial pock-mark wedged into one of the capital’s toughest neighbourhoods?

It was, of course, utterly magnificent and I’d give anything to climb inside it again for just one day.

I will never need regression or re-birthing to confirm I was a tremendously happy kid; confident, active and wildly popular. Perhaps that makes your lip curl, but honestly, the most traumatic thing that happened to me in my formative years was watching Millwall lose their fifty-nine-game unbeaten home record after being toppled by Plymouth Argyle. True, as your author and guide I appreciate there’s little communal pathos to be wrung there. P.G. Wodehouse noted in his own memoirs that being a contented and happy child is not what readers want from an autobiography. They look for darkness, regret and conflict, a glimpse of the wounded infant propping up the vindicated adult survivor. In short, a whiff of the workhouse.

Oh, I know the drill. The BBC recently broadcast a film adaptation of Toast, Nigel Slater’s lamentable, though successful, childhood memoirs: 100 minutes of pre-pubescent loneliness, desolation and misery complete with sad cello accompaniment. This heartache is essential to balance the orgy of fulfilment celebrity later brings. Alas, my tragedy is that I can offer no downbeat revelations, given that I literally beamed with joy throughout the entire sixties. No sad cello music would be required for my childhood; the most apt accompaniment would be a New Orleans jazz band tearing up ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’.

Why I was the kind of kid who leapt from his bed each day with
When the Saints Go Marching In

a wild ‘Hurrah!’ is hard to say. Even as the youngest in our brood I don't think I was particularly indulged. As you can imagine, we weren't a wealthy household, though, as far as I could see, we wanted for nothing. Actually, in that very statement, there may be a clue to the apparent sunny atmosphere indoors.

My parents had, not too long before I arrived, been living a pretty rough existence. I mean real, austerity post-war Britain: rationing, no work, one rented room in the East End of London. Proper poor. Until he joined the docks in 1954, my old man had drifted through employment. Among many casual jobs, he had been a hopeless labourer, trainee rag-and-bone man (failed) and had spent time in prison too. My mum had become pregnant at seventeen and they had married soon after without, I suspect, knowing each other that well. My brother and sister were both born in East London, where the whole family lived in one room of an old house owned by a Mrs Shears (‘Poor old Jeanie Shears …’) whose alcoholic husband pissed away every penny he earned as a chimney sweep. After years of struggling to make any kind of progress with their lives, they crossed the Thames – a huge upheaval in itself – to take up residence in a poky flat on the third floor of a pre-war block in downbeat Deptford called Congers House. It was here, in number 51, at 9 a.m. on Saturday, 22 June 1957, that I was born. I was delivered by Nurse Walkerdene and my dad had to be summoned back from the pub as he was about to set off on a docker’s beano – a boozy coach-trip to Margate. It was an outing he had been looking forward to for ages, and over the next few decades he would mention this infuriating inconvenience to me on more than one occasion.

At this point they had three children crammed into one bedroom. Consequently, when I was still a baby – indeed, because I was a very small baby – they were allocated a brand-new three-bedroom council flat on the ground floor of the Silwood Estate with a bathroom and a garden. They simply couldn't believe their luck. The railway and arches may as well have been rolling fields and double rainbows. Over the following decade, I harvested all the relief, freedom and optimism they suddenly felt. Things going right in their world had coincided with me coming along and, possibly misguided, I
couldn't help but feel partially responsible. Thus, by the age of three, my emerging ego was suitably robust.

Despite its unpromising location and meagre luxuries, Debnams Road was full of working-class families revelling in the sudden rise in their fortunes. All those who'd grabbed at the chance it offered – a bathroom being top of the boon-list – felt blessed indeed, and our block was a sturdy symbol of proletarian hopes and aspiration.

Here's how the occupants on the ground floor ran. Looking at the odd-numbers-only front doors and reading from right to left, it went: the Bakers, the Painters, the Punts. The Micalefs, the Dulligans and the Dempsters. Yes, the Punts. Even as a toddler, I knew the Punts, at number 15, had absolutely no music in their name.

Punt, let us be clear, is a dreadful surname, particularly if you are a teenage girl and particularly if your first name happens to be Doreen – as was the case with our fourteen-year-old near neighbour. Doreen Punt. I'll concede that, with some effort, it is just possible to get past the Doreen half of the arrangement, but then to immediately have to confront the Punt part of the deal is too much. One's ear tends to bridle and shut up shop.

Doreen Punt sounds exactly the sort of oath W.C. Fields might have muttered shortly after stubbing his toe against the bedstead. The name took the gold medal over the bronze and silver of the other terrible names on our estate: Marion Mould and Lance Savage.

I often wondered what would happen if Doreen Punt were to marry Lance Savage. What a terribly cruel trick of fate that would have been. There's Doreen, waiting her whole life to expunge the curse of Punt, and the one man to whom her heart calls out is called Savage. So she becomes Doreen Savage – which hardly seems to lighten the load, does it? Hyphenating makes it even worse. Doreen Savage-Punt. He'd be Lance Savage-Punt, which, frankly, is the kind of grim amalgamation that would see postmen leaving the mail at the end of their path before legging it.

By contrast, and here endeth my thoughts on names, in Congers House, we lived next door to a man called Jumbo Dray. Jumbo! Everyone called him 'Jumb'.

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The square occupied by the Debnams and Gillam blocks was completed by a snaking, six-foot-high brick wall that served to mark exactly where council property ended and St Gertrude’s Church property began. The clergy hated us council kids and would stick knives in our footballs rather than heave them back over the partition. So the only place we had to legally loiter was a kind of misshapen part-cobbled plot in front of the flats, which was far too small for another housing project and yet just big enough to be, well, something. And something is exactly what the council made of it.

They built us a boat. A boat!

Every community has a spot where the local youth hang out. Everyone from our flats congregated around the twelve-foot-long solid concrete ‘boat’. It was the focal point for all those between the ages of two and the mid-teens, a catchment area that in those baby-boom times made for a sizeable crowd.

Technically, I suppose it was more of a tug than a ship. It boasted a solid six-foot funnel at its centre and a crude but definite fo’c’sle. There were no ‘decks’ and it had no cover over it, but a well-sculpted solid-cement vessel it most certainly was and kids would slouch and slum all over it as they decided there were sufficient numbers for a two-a-side football tournament or whether they’d be better off opting for a game of ‘run-outs’ encompassing the entire sprawling estate of which our blocks were only a small part.

Run-outs really was the beautiful game. Have you played it? One person would be told to ‘hide their eyes’ – a phrase plainly handed down the centuries – while the rest of the crowd would scamper away to secrete themselves somewhere in the surrounding miles of flats, back alleys, bombsites and side turnings. Then they must all be found. Run-outs should not be confused with hide and seek. In run-outs, the search party swells as players get discovered and switch sides. There was an unspoken gentleman’s agreement that, once you had found your hiding place, you did not move from it. Not only would that have been cheating but it risked prolonging the game way beyond the two hours it usually took for all to be safely gathered in.

In my time I have hidden under parked cars, in rubbish chutes, on top of bus shelters and, on one occasion, inside one of the huge
'wigwam' bonfires pre-prepared for the upcoming November 5 celebrations. That was a terrific choice and much admired at the time. Strictly a seasonal retreat though.

Throughout the sixties the annual bonfire was one of the biggest deals in our calendar of events, and the gathering of wood to build these giant pyres in the months prior to Guy Fawkes' Night was taken very seriously indeed. Our part of the estate was adjacent to a few streets of wonderful but doomed Victorian houses, left abandoned and thoroughly gutted over the years of all fixtures that might feed our bonfire flames.

The shocking amount of superb front doors, back doors, cupboards, panels and window frames that we torched for fun – or at a pinch, tradition – sickens me when I think of it now. Particularly the lovely interior doors that we thought extra groovy because you could see the flames dancing through their stained-glass panels before they literally melted in a psychedelic dissolve.

There would be two bonfires on the estate, one on each of the large bombsites to the north and south. Key to having the best blaze would be the mighty centre pole. This, as you can surmise, would be the totem around which all other lumber would be draped. I never went on the search for a centre pole – bigger boys' work, that – and I have no idea where on earth they managed to find the perfect telegraph pole, plane tree or ship's mast that would be hoisted on teenage shoulders and marched back to the dump to be gradually festooned with top-drawer Victorian carpentry and subsequently ignited.

One year, ancient Mrs Scott, one of the last residents of wood-denuded, earmarked-for-demolition Silverlock Street called out to us:

'You boys want some old books for your bonfire?'

We did. We knew old books would make excellent kindling for the conflagration to come, and she had loads, so many that we had to fetch a builder's wheelbarrow and transport them in two trips. Scattered around the base of our growing monster, their pages and colour plates yanked out to poke in key crevices, up in urgent flames these lovely old volumes went. More disturbing to me today than the creepy Nazi imagery of it all is the nagging thought that beautiful first
editions of Dickens, Wilkie Collins, *Jorrocks’ Jaunts* and, gulp, Oscar Wilde would have been sacrificed simply so we could use the first wisps of that towering inferno to light our Jumping Jacks. Younger readers may marvel in wonder at the long-prohibited Jumping Jack – an unpredictable concertina’d fizzer designed to cause panic within a fifty-yard radius. If you weren’t quick to back away after lighting the touchpaper, it might land on you, popping and exploding in your turn-ups. Oh, a terrific firework, the Jumping Jack.

Ironically, and despite the casual vandalism of Mrs Scott’s library, I was completely besotted with Victorian authors at the time. No wait, that sounds hopelessly grand. What I mean is that from as early an age as I can recall, I adored Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, particularly ‘Jabberwocky’ and Lear’s short story about Violet, Guy Lionel and Slingsby who sailed around the world.

Just pondering the comic brilliance and sheer oddness in the name ‘Slingsby’ – and remember, I had been raised on Jumbo Dray – would make me stare off into the middle distance, mouth set in a frozen chuckle. Surely nobody had ever been called Slingsby, had they? It sounds like somewhere in North Yorkshire. Oh, hang on, it is somewhere in North Yorkshire. What genius! Like the nonsense words scattered throughout ‘Jabberwocky’, here was a writer who didn't care for form and the norm. He called a character Slingsby and defied the world to make something of it. Nonsense, that was the way forward. Utter, baffling nonsense. Let the world walk this way and I will walk that way. All who choose a similar path will be friends for life. Prog rock here I come.

There was one particular book in our infant school library that mesmerized me like no other. It was called, rather generically, *The Book of Nonsense* and was a hefty compendium with Charles Folkard’s magnificent cover illustration featuring an assortment of the freakish characters featured within – Shockheaded Peter, Aged Uncle Arly, Jabberwocky, Baron Munchausen, ‘The Owl and the Pussycat’ and countless others – gathered, for some reason, at the seaside. I had it out on virtual permanent loan. The volume encompassed not only Carroll and Lear but a whole storehouse of oddities such as:
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Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh, how I wish he'd go away.

And:

One fine day in the middle of the night
Two dead men got up to fight . . .

And my favourite:

He thought he saw an elephant
That practised on a fife
He looked again, and found it was
A letter from his wife.
'At length I realize,' he said,
'The bitterness of life!'

Indeed, by the age of seven, had anyone asked if I could recite any Charles Dickens I could have said absolutely. After all, I recognized him as the man who wrote

Choo a choo a tooth
Munch Munch Nicey
Choo a choo a tooth
Munch Munch Nicey.

And that's not an extract. That's the whole thing. Take that, so-called Tale of Two Cities.

Virtually all this word fascination can be credited to my father, for all that he himself only ever appeared to read one book over and over again: Robert Tressell’s The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists. But it was my old man who sat me on his lap when I was about five and read aloud Browning’s The Pied Piper of Hamelin from an enormous Bible-sized compilation of ‘good’ literature that, otherwise,
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went un-browsed. Oh man, what an experience. All that 'munch on, crunch on, take your nuncheon . . .' and grumbling, rumbling, tumbling, Doom's tone and tombstone. Not to mention:

Nor brighter was his eye, nor moister
Than a too-long-opened oyster,
Save when at noon his paunch grew mutinous
For a plate of turtle, green and glutinous

I had absolutely no idea what most of it meant, but can clearly recall how shocked I was at the betrayal in the lines:

A thousand guilders! Come, take fifty!

And how much I too yearned to vanish into the side of a mountain like the Hamelin youth – so long as I could emerge very soon after and heroically tell everyone the full eye-popping exclusive story.