

# UNCAGED!

By

Neil Harvey

With Linda Jenkins

## **Acknowledgements**

I want give my first acknowledgement to Jesus, the One who has totally transformed my life and has saved me from certain death. He is my best Friend and I love him so much. If it were not for Him, I hate to think where I would be now. Words fail to express my gratitude, Jesus. My life is Yours.

I also want to thank Karen my wife for all her love in life, and support in the ministry. You are a treasure, and a very special gift from God.

I want to acknowledge my mother who introduced me to Jesus, and made me go to Sunday school when I was a kid. It has had huge consequences. Thanks Mum – love ya!

I also want to acknowledge my family who always stick together through difficult times. And who never turned their back on me even when I was at my worst. At my wedding, my proud father said 'He has always been Neil Harvey.'

I also want to acknowledge Pastor Roy Lewis, who has been a great spiritual father to me, and who has always been there. You have helped me find my way more than you know.

I would also like to say thank you to Peter Prothero. It is a privilege to have you as a friend and mentor – Top guy!

I want to say a huge thank you Linda Jenkins, who has worked so hard to get this story down on paper. It has not been easy but we made it. Thank you, Linda for all your patience and

commitment. And a big thank you to her husband Ken who allowed her to give so much time.

Love to you both.

Lastly, I would like to say a huge thank you to all those who have prayed for me over the years. Your prayers have been answered, and ain't I glad! A special thank you to Haydn and Ruth Roach, such lovely people, who have been a great testimony for God over the years. A special thank you, also, to Vi Haynes who has prayed for me all my life. And last but not least I would like to remember Bert Cooper who is now with Jesus.

## **Recommendations**

Neil is one of those unforgettable people who leaves an impression on you when you meet him. His strong Welsh accent is unmistakable. His physical presence is solid. His sincerity is disarming. His laughter is infectious. When you listen to him you sense that, despite his lack of formal education, he has spent time with Jesus. He knows stuff; stuff about life, about how people feel on the inside, about what really matters. And he cares. His passion to see those for whom society holds little regard find hope, forgiveness and a new beginning is inspiring. His stories about real people and real places make me laugh and cry at the same time. And he's modest too. He's held back from telling about many of the miracles he's seen through his ministry, so that Jesus can shine through more clearly. If you get to spend time with him, you'll come away believing that life can be better and that your life really counts. You see, Neil knows what it means to hit rock bottom and have nowhere to go and then to see his life totally turned around. His story will touch you; it will challenge you. Most of all I hope it will change you. Once you start reading this book it will be hard to put it down. I dare you to start reading it. It will change your life.

*(Peter Prothero, Part of the Global Equippers Apostolic Team)*

I am delighted to endorse Neil Harvey's book 'Uncaged.' This story is a living testimony of God's saving grace today. The message of God's Love, Mercy, Redemption, forgiveness and the power of Gospel of Salvation through Jesus Christ are wonderfully crafted as Neil shares his testimony through the pages this book.

*Ps Bruce H Monk (International Overseer for Acts and Equippers Churches)*

Neil for many years has always had a passion for others to come into the freedom that he himself has come into. The book 'Uncaged' is Neil really taking you through his journey to that freedom that he wants to express. This book will encourage those who have made the wrong choices in life and would like a brighter future. This book can be read by parents whose children have been caught up in life controlling problems to give them hope that there is an answer. This book should be read by everyone who has a passion to see people with addiction come into freedom. It's a reminder of the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ and Neil's life is an example of that. As you read this book, this incredible testimony I know that you will be empowered, renewed, refreshed and inspired to continue to have hope for all in Jesus Christ.

*(Reverend Jay Fallon – Executive Director Teen Challenge UK)*

Neil writes with refreshing honesty about his journey to faith. He is as we say in Wales a 'proper' man of God. His testimony is a great encouragement to those of us who find ourselves working amongst the marginalised and rejected in society.

*(Revd Mark Thomas, Senior Chaplain HMP&YOI Ashfield)*

I first met Neil when I interviewed him as a potential student at Bible College. On the one side, there was a character who had obviously abused his mind and body and on the other side there was someone who was desperate to learn everything he could about the God who loved him. Addictive personalities can sound so plausible in getting what they want and then become a nightmare once they have it, but Neil was different. We didn't have a full intake on his course that year and so we registered him. I have never seen anybody absorb knowledge at such a rate. When things were difficult for the students he would call instant prayer meetings. When he did not understand things, he would question and question and question. I

had to represent him at the University Exam Board and I had tears in my eyes as we signed off his results confirming that he had passed his first formal educational qualification.

The book is written at a furious pace but anything else would decry the speed with which God has transformed his life. Read it and rejoice that God is still in the business of changing lives.

*(Pastor Bryn Thomas B.Sc., M.Th. Former principal of ACTS Bible College)*

‘As churches and people we need to be reminded that God is still doing wonders for the ‘least, the lost and the low’... rescuing people, and that He can do it for us. Read Neil’s honest and remarkable story.’

*(David Ollerton, Chairman of Waleswide – a ministry that focuses on planting and strengthening churches)*

Those who know me well know that I love stories. I love to listen and read people’s stories. Narratives which chronicle life’s journeys of transformation not only have the capacity to hold the reader’s attention from start to finish; they represent an authentic and credible voice in our vacuous world of celebrity nothingness. Neil’s book falls squarely into the category of that which is both authentic and credible. It is so, because his story is true. This book is more a get-to-the-point testimony than a never-ending tome or testament; an open and honest account of his life journey, with one singular theme: that God loves us too much to leave us where we are; and that He has and will go to great lengths to reach us and bring us out of the grip and quagmire of sin, characterised by the brutality of life-destroying addictions, anger, rejection and every kind of evil. Jesus’ love and power can reach and transform you, whoever you are, wherever you are and no matter where you come from; as you respond to Him in believing faith. Many years ago, I had heard about Neil and the great work of change that

Jesus had done in his life. In the last few years, as I have got to know him better, I can testify that his story is real. It is one of a life that has truly been changed by the love of Jesus and who in turn has become an agent of change. The application is very simple; if Jesus can change the life of Neil Harvey, He can change you too.

I am delighted to endorse and recommend this book.

*(Emmanuel Mbakwe, National Leader, Apostolic Church, UK)*

I still remember the morning I first saw Neil Harvey when he walked into our service at Brackla Tabernacle, Bridgend.

I knew something about him and that he had promised to come to church, and I still recall where he sat that morning. I remember equally well the time when some weeks later he boldly walked to the front of the church to commit his life to Jesus Christ.

You are about to read his incredible story, which I know will grip you and maybe at times bring tears to your eyes. Neil's story still has that effect on me.

But Neil not only has a past, Neil, together with his lovely Danish wife Karen, have an exciting future. They are a couple with a great love for God, and a great desire to see people's lives transformed. Very quickly Neil became a keen student of the Bible, and now has a great ability to understand and competently communicate the truth of God's Word to a society that desperately needs that message.

After almost 40 years in pastoral ministry, seeing Neil, and many others from his background are completely transformed, has been without doubt the most amazing experience of my ministry, and I have been so thrilled to welcome such men and women into the Family of God. May this book become a tool that many others may also experience such an amazing transformation.

*(Pastor Roy Lewis, former senior pastor of Brackla Tabernacle)*

## **Dedications**

I want to dedicate this book to a number of people;

Firstly to Jesus, I pray you take this book now and use it to save to the uttermost.

Secondly, to every person who feels that life has let them down – There is hope and his name is Jesus.

To all that feel trapped in some sort of addiction – You can change!

To the youth of our day who need guidance and a God revival – Love you all and may God move in your life.



### **A word from the author**

The author would like to add, that the stories and events in this book, have not been written with the aim in any way to gloat about the wrong things that he has done, neither to expose anyone in any way at all. Therefore, some names have also been changed for the individuals involved.

It is the authors aim to simply get the reader's attention to the real message of the book, which is, that Jesus changes lives!

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## Chapter 1

### What have I become?

*'Someone has broken in!'*

It was my first thought as my eyes flickered open and I remembered the broken window catch downstairs. Instantly, every nerve was buzzing and I was alert for danger. It was 3 a.m.

I had been awake for days, high on amphetamines, before finally falling into an exhausted, uneasy sleep. I had learned how to sleep and still be ready for whatever might happen in the dead of night. They call it sleeping with one eye open.

As usual, I had left the lights on; darkness always made me uneasy. That night, in fact, I had put on as many lights as I could, instinct warning me that something was wrong. In the world that I inhabited, a world of violence and murder, a world without rules, you had to be able to look after yourself. Anything could happen.

The bedroom door opened and a bulky, muscular figure entered. *Stephen!* My heart pounded as I realised who it was. We had been such close friends - but things were not good between us right now and I knew very well what he wanted. Nerves tingling, I braced myself for what might come.

Steve's eyes bored into me, angry and unblinking. Without a word, he moved swiftly towards me and before I could do anything to defend myself, he was on top of me, pounding his fist into my face. He is over 6 feet tall, a hard, powerful man with hands like shovels. Well-used to heavy violence, he had spent a lot of his life in prison. I was a hard man myself, but just then, I was helpless as a kitten in his grasp.

I had been working in a notorious drugs ring as a runner. It was my job to pick up packages of drugs, keep them safe and deliver them to the right people. We were often followed by the

drugs squad and I knew that my house was under surveillance. When I handled large quantities of narcotics, the safest thing to do was to bury them until the dust settled and I thought I was not being watched. Then I could dig them up and deliver them to our clients. But this time, something had gone terribly wrong. I had lost a package of drugs worth more than £5000 on the streets.

Stephen and Mark had taken me to a quiet location, a field, to bury a couple of packages. You had to jump over the gate to get in and in the corner there was woodland, providing a good place to hide the gear. As usual, the other two men waited for me in their car. I looked around to make sure that no-one was watching, then ran to the corner of the field and buried the two packages. Adrenaline pumped around my body; I knew that, at any time, the police could arrive on the scene and that, if I was caught, I could spend a few years in prison. We had often discussed whether, if they did turn up, we would fight them or try to lose them in a car chase. This was a dangerous game.

I ran back to the car and we spun off fast, adrenaline still pumping. The boys dropped me off at my house and then we all split, going our separate ways and allowing things to settle down. We always waited for a couple days before going back, not wanting to attract attention by driving along the same country lane too many times.

When it was time to retrieve one of the packages, I went to the spot where I thought it should be, and dug. Nothing! The earth had been disturbed, but I could not tell whether someone had been there or whether cows had trodden the area. Panic and horror rose in me. This could get me into a lot of trouble!

‘Where is it?’ My mind searched desperately for answers. ‘It’s not here!’

Frantically, I fell to my knees and started to dig with my bare hands, not daring to go back and admit what had happened. The nightmare in my thoughts grew worse as hope faded that

there was anything left to be found. After about twenty minutes, Mark and Stephen came to see what I was doing. I had to tell them the truth.

'It's gone! I can't find it!' I admitted miserably.

'What do you mean "gone"?' they demanded. Both of them, my trusted friends, had suspicion in their eyes and it made me feel very uncomfortable. We searched for a while longer in the darkness, but it was hopeless.

'I'll have to look in daylight,' I said, stating the obvious.

As we left the place and made our way across the field, I tried to ease the tension between us, but it was a very awkward moment.

Next day, another guy from the gang helped me search. We tried all morning but found nothing, though we dug up every inch of the area involved. Frantic questions flooded my mind. Who had taken it? Was it another dealer? A local addict maybe? Had the farmer seen me? Had the police followed me and removed it? Would I be arrested? Above all, would Mark and Stephen think that I had taken it?

Addiction changes people and, because of that, trust is always difficult. Nice people could become thieves or prostitutes to finance their habit. I had seen it happen too many times. I knew that Mark and Steve were bound to wonder whether I had set something up in order to steal this package.

Now Stephen's pounding blows were proving it to me.

'Where is it? Where has it gone?' he demanded roughly, his face close to mine. For the moment, the beating ceased.

'Steve, I don't know,' I protested, trying hard to sound convincing.

Quite suddenly, he walked out of the room. I sat on the edge of the bed trying to get my head around what was happening, my heart pounding. Had he gone? Was it over?

It wasn't - and I was not ready for what came next. When Steve came back, in his hand was a long knife from my kitchen.

'Where is it?' he demanded again and raised the knife. He had just come out of prison, convicted of involvement in a stabbing. I knew he was capable of wounding me, if not killing me. He was angry enough and anything can happen in those moments. Where would this end?

'Can we talk about this?' I begged. 'I swear I would not cheat you!'

I was telling the truth. I was doing a lot of drugs and they made me forgetful, so that I had made more than one mistake recently, but I would never have stolen that quantity of drugs, especially from friends.

'How are you going to get rid of a dead body?' I pleaded, tears in my eyes. I thought I was going to die and I had no pride left, only a desperate desire to live – or, at least, not to be killed by my trusted friend.

To my intense relief, after a long moment he put down the knife.

Hard man though I was, I put my head in my hands and cried helplessly. I had been running too fast for too long and the pressure was too much. What hurt most was that I knew I was becoming unreliable. Even my closest friends thought so. I felt like I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown again. I'd had a few of those, so I knew the signs.

Stephen sat beside me on the edge of the bed and said, almost apologetically,

'This was the only way I could know for certain that you did not take the package.' When I had calmed down, he added, 'Where is the tick list?' This was a list of people who owed money for drugs.

Stumbling into the bathroom, I pulled up a loose floorboard to expose the place where I stashed things I didn't want the police to find. To my horror, the tick list was not there.

'Oh, no! Where is it?'

I tried desperately to think straight. This was not a good moment to be forgetful! Then I remembered. I had put it in a drawer in my bedroom. I found it and handed it over and Stephen scanned the list. There was quite a lot of money to come in and this cheered him up. The tension between us eased.

Stephen moved towards the door. He paused and looked at me.

“What has happened to you? I just can’t trust you anymore! It is because you are using needles.’

With that, he left as quietly as he had arrived.

Stephen’s words hit me more forcibly than he could know, more forcibly than his iron fists. There had been so much trust between us and I would have gone to prison rather than betray him. But I was a junkie. Even my best efforts to get free had failed and I was trapped in a cycle of addiction and crime, despising myself and yet helpless to change.

‘*I am a junkie!* That is not just *what* I am but *who* I am. It has become my identity,’ I thought. My lifestyle as a dealer and addict had caught up with me. I had been living on borrowed time, heading for disaster, and now not even my closest friends could trust me.

As I thought about all this, I saw myself as I used to be, before I surrendered my life to addiction – fit, fun to be with, reliable, maybe even a nice guy. Not for the first time, I was overwhelmed with longing to be that person again.

I closed my eyes and fell at once into a deep sleep. My body and mind were exhausted and I was on the verge of complete emotional and physical breakdown. How could I have let myself get into this state? My uneasy dreams sent up image after image of friends and enemies, broken relationships, stabbings, theft, quarrels, drug trading, as the past that so often churned around in my thoughts came once again to haunt me...

## Chapter 2

### The 'Good' Old Days.

As I lay snugly in bed, I could hear footsteps coming up the stairs. I knew just what was happening. My grandmother was about to come into my bedroom to wake me for my early morning run.

“Neil, it’s 6 o’clock,” she told me, adding, “I don’t know why you are getting up so early on a Saturday morning. You should be having a lay in.”

She said that every time. It made me feel secure and cared about.

I loved to stay with my grandparents and would do so at every opportunity, spending most weekends and holidays with them. I still remember the feeling I had on Friday afternoons, sitting in class and thinking about the weekend.

‘Yes! It is Friday!’ I would exult to myself. “Tonight I will be going up to Mam and Granddad’s.’

Joy and warm happiness filled my heart. It was as though nothing could touch me when I was with them.

My grandfather was very popular in our village and he had a lot of respect. He was a kind man, hard working, the oldest of 6 brothers and sisters. As the oldest son, responsibility fell on him for his siblings during the war when his father was away serving in the forces. He had been a coal miner from the age of eleven, tough and brave as such men were. My grandmother, too, was a strong person who always spoke her mind. She loved her family and, in her eyes, if any of us got in to trouble, it was never our fault. I felt safe in their care, and their home was my place of security.



Their house was a meeting place for the rest of the family, who often dropped by for a cuppa. It was always lovely to stay in Mam and Granddad's at Christmas and the New Year, because the house would be buzzing with people.

I was about 12 years old, full of life and with hopes and dreams like any young boy. I was very good at sports and loved anything to do with fitness. One of my dreams was to play rugby for Wales and I would spend hours kicking a ball around.

Running was another passion. When I went to stay at Mum and Granddad's house, I would time myself to see how fast I could run there, always trying to beat last week's time. I was a fitness fanatic. At their home, I spent hours writing training and fitness programmes and even planned to write a book about it when I grew older. I won a cup for running the 400 metre race in junior school and, at comprehensive school, I was trialled to run for my country. To my intense disappointment, I did not get in although, just a week before, I had raced and beaten one boy who was selected. Perhaps I would have been successful if I had not been in a football match just before the trials, I comforted myself.

I became interested in weight training after I watched a movie called 'Pumping Iron.' Body building soon had me completely hooked and Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the stars of the movie, became my hero. I spent hours training, wanting to be as muscular as I could get. But though I seemed so strong, underneath this I was in a turmoil I could never really deal with and didn't understand. It was to grow and grow inside me, until it consumed me.

My mother and father had separated when I was a very young child and I lived with my mother. As time went by, both my parents remarried and had families of their own. I know now separation sometimes happens in life, but to me at the time, a sensitive little boy, it seemed a disaster. I became deeply confused, tormented by a monster much bigger than me that seemed to tell me I was in the way and not really wanted. That thought became an

obsession. I had a constant knot in my stomach as I pondered the idea that I was mistake, nothing but a nuisance and a thorn in people's sides.

My stepfather was a good man, well known and well respected in the area, but a very tough man, and a bit of a brawler who didn't seem to be frightened of anyone. I admired him but often misunderstood his intentions, when I sometimes misbehaved and was told off. I perceived it as additional signs of not being wanted, although I desperately wanted to belong. I had a deep, lonely feeling inside. I still saw my father and his new wife but because of the monster in my head I became consumed by one question.

'Who do I really belong to?'

There seemed no answer. My sense of rejection grew.

Fitness and sport were important to me, but it was not easy to focus when I was tormented by these painful thoughts. I was about thirteen when I became involved in solvent abuse. One of those kids who hang around in the streets with nothing to do, nowhere to go and no desire to go home, I sniffed petrol, gas, lighter fluid and glue, although petrol was my drug of choice. With a bunch of friends, I spent hours sniffing this stuff to get high. I wanted to escape reality.

We were all troubled, crazy kids, up to no good. Don was well-known to the police from childhood. He was full of anger and hatred. Even years later, you have only to mention his name to some elderly people in the community and they shudder. He harassed them mercilessly, circling his bike around them and spitting on them. When he grew up, he became a habitual criminal who spent much of his life in jail.

Andy, another friend, we nicknamed Murdoch after the crazy character in the A-team. He was always up for doing something dangerous, just for the laugh. Danny, the fourth member of our substance-dependant group, was a couple of years older than us. I was jealous of him. After bunking off school and sniffing petrol all day, I knew that I would be in trouble when I

got home. Danny could do as he liked, not because he was neglected but because he was spoilt. Maybe this was because his older brothers had a different father and so Danny was almost an only child, the only mixed race child in the family. Together, the four of us ran wild.

It all started one summer holiday. Someone had the idea of getting some petrol so we could get high, and we all decided that was a great idea. We got old oil cartons from the bins at the petrol station, drained out the oil then bought 20p worth of petrol to put in them. It felt good and we soon found places where we could indulge our addiction. One was an abandoned scrap yard and garage that we called Paddy's, getting in through a broken fence. Another was a derelict building in a quarry. Often, we used a wooded area where we would stay as long as we could, get high and hallucinating. Once I really thought I rose into the air with the petrol can in my hand and began floating across the fields.

'I don't want to go! Take me back! Take me back!' cried the petrol can.

So I tried to throw it back. Instead, I threw the petrol all over Danny!

One day, in this wooded area, we discovered a path that wound through the trees and this became our drug-induced adventure playground. Some of our best trips were in that wooded area. When we came to a little area completely enclosed by bushes, we put a branch across the entrance so that we were hidden in our own secret place.

'Hey, boys,' I said. 'We're in our own Time Machine!'

The idea caught on and we laughed and nodded. We came up with the idea that if we sniffed petrol as fast as we could for 30 seconds we could go back in time. In our hallucinations, bizarrely, we really did seem to do so. Someone would lift the branch.

'I'm opening the door of the Time Machine,' he'd cry.

The rest of us followed him deeper into the wood. In the fantasy world we created, we came first to the Stepping Stones, really just clumps of grass.

'Come on, boys,' Danny said. 'Stay on the Stepping Stones. Anyone who falls off goes down into that horrible pit.' He pointed melodramatically at the ground.

Spaced out on solvents, we walked on them and saw a deep and terrifying pit below us. We believed that we would fall into it if we could not balance on the Stepping Stones. Well, I believed it, anyway.

Around the corner was denser woodland that we called the Haunted Wood. None of us ever dared go in there, fearing what might be lurking among the trees. I was sure we could hear noises coming from that dense wood, sometimes. We crept past it, and as we came around the corner we came to an old tree that looked as if it had a face in the grain.

'It's the Talking Tree,' I said, with a grin on my face. It was my turn to invent something crazy and mystical.

'Hello, tree! We have a question for you.'

The tree seemed friendly, like a wise old man and we asked it our questions about life. In our spaced out condition, the conversation was probably pretty confused. If someone had seen us, they might have called for the 'men in white coats'!

Of course, on one level, I knew it was not really happening, yet it seemed utterly real and I wanted it to be so. Life was out of control but at least I could control the fantasy world that I had created. The whole point was to escape from reality and I wished I could stay there forever.

## Chapter 3

### Trouble

I crept reluctantly into the house. It was late and I was hoping to avoid the family and get straight to bed. No such luck! The kitchen door opened and my mother looked out and sniffed the air.

'You smell of petrol, boy! Where've you been?' She looked hard at me, noting my glassy eyes and unsteady walk. 'What have you been doing?'

'One of the boys got a motorbike. We've been messing around with it,' I lied.

Mum did not believe me but she let me go off to bed.

Before long, we overstepped the boundaries of good sense completely, walking through a main street carrying a can of petrol and sniffing it. Someone I knew recognised me and called my mother. My stepfather came and found me, and I knew I was in big trouble. We went home and my mother went mad with me. I stared at her sullenly and said nothing. I was grounded for a few weeks but, as soon as I was allowed out, I went straight back on the petrol.

Although I tried all sorts of tricks to hide what I was doing, it was no good. Again and again, my mother screamed at me and urged my stepfather to smell the petrol on me. I stonewalled them but those moments when everyone in the house seemed to be looking at me were terrible to me, like all eyes were on me. Neil the nuisance.

'Why, oh why do you do it, Neil?' my gentle mother sobbed. 'Don't you realise that you are ruining your life? It breaks my heart!'

I knew that she loved me and was deeply hurt and part of me hated to see her cry and, once, I even promised to stop. But another part of me enjoyed the attention I was getting through my bad behaviour, so I started again.

Mum cut out an article from the newspaper. It was a story of a young girl, a neighbour of ours, who had died from sniffing some sort of aerosol.

Mum stuck it to my wardrobe door, along with other similar stories she had found and made me read them.

'Go on, read it! Read it aloud!'

Unwillingly, I obeyed.

'Read it again!'

I pretended to read it silently, swaying because I was so high.

'I'm going to make you read it every night,' she promised. 'I'll send you to the Homes if you keep on sniffing petrol.'

I did not believe she would really put me into care. She might hope that the threat would make me take her seriously, but there was no chance of that.

When I went home one evening, high yet again, Mum put me in the car and took me to the houses of both sets of grandparents. As I stood in their living room, woozy and spaced out, she wept.

'See what he is like! He's fourteen years old! How am I supposed to cope with this?'

My mother's sister, a psychiatric nurse, tried to reason with me, reminding me that people loved me. It was nice to hear but made no real difference. Tormented by inner conflict as I was, part of me was sad because of what I was putting people through, but another part of me was stubborn and I wanted to make a point.

Mum told my biological father and he tried to talk to me about it. He told me a story of a man he knew who was a very talented football player. He had a good career in front of him

until, one summer he took a load of magic mushrooms and ended up losing his mind. All his dreams were dashed and he spent the next 20 years trying to recover.

‘Do you want that?’ My father asked.

I had no answer.

We did not mean any real harm, but things were getting serious. Even when I was grounded, I heard stories of how Andy was sniffing gas on his own, walking around the streets with the can hidden in a newspaper. Youngsters though we were, there were already signs of hard core drug activity.

I hated school. The only thing I was good at was sport. I was in the weightlifting team and won a silver award in a competition, as well as a five-star award in athletics. In anything else I just couldn’t concentrate and my only ambition was to leave. There was nothing wrong with the school. The problem was in me. Still, we had some good laughs, me and my mates. Messing about was one thing that did make me happy.

‘Hey, Simon,’ I whispered, as the chemistry teacher droned on one day. ‘Listen to this!’

We put our ears against the high wooden experiment bench and I knocked gently, grinning as the sound echoed oddly around the lab. Simon glanced around warily, then knocked too. There was that funny noise again! We giggled. Bored and restless as ever, we kept it up for a while, trying to make the lesson a bit more fun. After that, Simon stopped, but foolishly, I carried on, until I realised that the room had gone very quiet. Looking around, I saw that everyone was looking at me.

‘Are you enjoying yourself, Harvey?’ enquired the teacher dryly. He hooked his thumb towards the door, ‘Out!’

Trying to look cool, I made for the door and stood in the corridor for the rest of the lesson, hoping that the Headmaster would not walk by and see me. Half of me hoped that he would, so that I could look really cool to the rest of the class by shooting my mouth off at him.

In physics, the teacher rigged up an electrical device which caused a mild electric shock. We kids had to line up to touch it. I watched each pupil hesitantly put out a finger and make contact. You could hear it buzz as each pupil jumped back. The teacher just laughed.

‘Man this guy’s sick!’ I thought. Then he wanted me to do it.

‘There’s no way I’m going to touch that thing!’ I said.

‘Just do it, Harvey,’ sighed the teacher. He had had trouble with me before.

‘No!’

‘Come on Harvey, the rest of the class has done it, now it is your turn.’ Encouraged by the amused attention of the rest of the class, I stuck to my guns until it became a showdown.

I was thrown out for that, too.

One of my mates was really good at making people laugh when the teacher’s back was turned. I fell for it every time. He would make me laugh and then as the teacher would turn around he would just look down as if he had been working all along. I couldn’t control myself and just kept on laughing. So I got thrown out and he stayed to get some other poor sap into trouble.

One very hot day, after a sports lesson, I didn’t put on my shirt and tie, just my sweater. As I walked down the corridor, I met the Head of Year, Mr Thomas. I could see suppressed rage in his eyes.

‘Get into my office!’ he commanded. Following me, he shut the door.

‘Harvey I hate you!’ he hissed.

I stared at him defiantly, remembering the time when I was in his office for some bad behaviour or other and he’d told me,

‘Harvey, I think more of the slugs at the bottom of my garden than I think of you,’

I must have got on his nerves something rotten. Through clenched teeth, as he jabbed me in the chest with his finger, he added,



‘Me and you! Twenty to four! Down the field! *Off the books!*’

I knew just what he meant. He wanted a fight. I thought about it for a moment but then realised how stupid it was. Anyway, he was bigger than me.

‘No thanks,’ I said. He gave me a tongue-lashing before I sauntered out of his office.

When I turned up for school one day, every single teacher asked me to leave the classroom, before the lesson had even started. Feeling that they should be pleased that I had turned up at all, I went to see the Head Teacher. He took no notice of my complaints.

‘We just don’t think it is worth you being here any longer,’ he told me. ‘You’re not interested in learning and you stop other pupils from learning. The exams are coming soon and you won’t be able to pass them, so you might as well leave school now.’

I sensed that he was not so much angry as disappointed and sad, as if he was thinking what a waste it all was. But I would not let him see my shock and rejection.

‘Ok,’ I said offhandedly, as if it was nothing to me, and I turned on my heel and left his room for the last time. As I strolled out of the main entrance, I turned around and stuck two fingers in the air.

Then I walked off down the street, with a sense of new freedom.

## Chapter 4

### Frustration

Life was still difficult at home. It seemed I couldn't do anything right and I was grounded most of the time. I spent the next couple of years moving back and forth between my grandparents and Mum and stepfather's house, trying to settle down. I even got a job, as an apprentice in a car repair shop. It meant working in the shop for four days of the week and going to college on Wednesdays.

At the same time, though, I took my next step into the drug scene and went from sniffing petrol to smoking cannabis. I had always done things to the limit and when I got involved in the cannabis scene I knocked around with the dealers and the 'old heads', addicts who had been at it for a long time.

There was a squat in the next village, an empty council flat, where local boys met to smoke dope. Two of them were dealers, so there was no shortage of drugs. We spent all our evenings getting stoned and then, at around midnight, I went home to my grandparents' house to sleep. Before long, I was going to the squat instead of to college. More and more, my only interest was in smoking some more stuff and forgetting my inner struggles.

One night, on my way home from the squat, I thought about my problems until it felt like my head would explode, trying fruitlessly to figure out answers to my many problems. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I had a vivid, unforgettable mental image. I can only call it a vision.

Huddled in the corner of a cage, I saw a young, innocent child. He looked utterly vulnerable and frightened. Another boy was outside the cage. He was more grown up, bigger and much nastier; evil- looking, in fact. He was poking the boy in the cage with a stick, torturing and

bullying him, seemingly determined to keep that helpless, lonely child caged up. As I looked closer, I realised with a shock that both boys were me. One Neil was scared and confused and trying to protect himself, while the other was really nasty and evil. The impact of this mental image was so strong that my legs actually gave way and I almost fell to my knees. I felt terribly vulnerable, as if my whole world could have shattered any moment.

‘I must be having some kind of breakdown,’ I thought.

Somehow, and I don’t know how, I managed to pull myself together and keep walking. When I got home, I went straight to bed to try to sleep, half fearful, half on the alert.

‘Hi, Granddad!’ I strolled into the house at around four o’clock, trying to pretend that I had been to college for the Wednesday lectures that were part of my apprenticeship.

‘How did college go today?’ he asked, eyeing me keenly.

‘Fine,’ I lied, evading his gaze.

‘You haven’t been there!’ He spoke firmly. ‘The college sent someone here today to ask why you haven’t been in class for the last couple of months.’

Our eyes met. I could think of nothing to say.

‘You can’t stay here if you are going to live like this.’ There was finality in his voice.

Granddad loved me, but he was also a very tough man and not someone to be argued with. Silently, knowing that he meant it, I went to my room to collect my things. I will always remember the awful feeling as I packed my bags as slowly as I could, wishing things were different. I thought about other people I knew and how wonderful their lives must be, and I wished so much that I could be someone else.

I left Granddad’s house silently, knowing it was my own fault and my own choice.

I continued with my job as a trainee car sprayer. I had a few problems with the boss after I gave him major headache, but I did manage to learn something and found a job in another

local car repair centre, called 'Poacher and Davies'. I was about 17. At around the same time, I found a girlfriend, and so did my cousin, Mark.

Mark had quite a reputation. We had not spent a lot of time together, but there was a bond between us. Trouble seemed to find him, but he always came out on top. Even tough, older men respected him because of the way he stood his ground in a fight. He showed respect and he expected it back!

My girlfriend and I decided to get engaged. We booked a room and a DJ, bought the ring and sent out invitations to the party. Then I found out that she had been seeing someone else! Humiliated and deeply hurt. I had to tell everyone that the party was cancelled. I had been rejected again.

'What's the point in trying?' I asked myself, and I could not find an answer.

After that, my life was even more out of control. I decided to move out of my mother's house, where I was living at the time, so I could do as much partying as possible. I found a bedsit in the pleasant seaside town of Porthcawl nearby. I intended to keep my job but I was missing a lot of time. I just couldn't be bothered.

My friend Christian got a bedsit in the same block as me and we had some great drinking parties.

'There are so many cans of alcohol in the fridge that there's no room for food,' he told me and we laughed.

Work was no laugh, though. One day, waiting at the roadside for my lift, I thought about the day ahead. How I would get through it? I felt trapped and depressed and fed up with it all. Christian had a fortnight's holiday from his job at the Sony factory and was back at his bedsit, sleeping, which made me feel even worse.

‘There must be more to life than this!’ I thought. ‘There’s just no purpose at all in going to work day after day.’ Then a truly brilliant thought occurred to me. ‘Me and Christian could go to France and get jobs picking fruit!’

I wrestled with the idea for a few minutes, debating what to do. My lift would arrive in a few minutes and I knew that, if I failed to show up at work again, I would probably be sacked. But the more I thought about going to France, the more excited I became.

‘If you leave this place now, there’s no turning back, Neil,’ I told myself. But in my heart, the decision had already been made. Before long, I was on my way back to the bedsit to wake Christian and tell him the good news.

‘I’m going to France! Yes! I’m going to France!’ My pace quickened. I was excited that there was a way out of my problems. A fresh start! I was always looking for one of those.

Back at the bedsit, I burst into Christian’s room and shook his foot to wake him.

‘Get up, Chris. Get up!’

Chris looked at me sleepily. ‘What’s going on?’

‘We are moving to France!’

He looked woozily out of the window. ‘But it is raining!’ He said.

I thought that was hilarious.

‘It’ll be sunny in France,’ I promised.

Soon, Chris was as excited as me. We gave up our bedsits and went to say goodbye to our families.

‘We’re moving to France to go fruit picking,’ I told my mother. ‘Nobody cares about me, anyway.’ I was still trying to punish her.

‘If you said that to your grandfather, he would hit you,’ she replied.

Granddad tried to talk me out of it but, of course, I would not listen. So, typically, he gave me £50 to help me on my way.

Our journey to France ended prematurely because we stopped at a pub in Porthcawl and spent all the money on booze and food! Our whole journey was only about three miles.

Christian went back home to his parents and his job after his holiday. I didn't go back to work, though. It would be a waste of time, I told myself. I still had my bedsit but time and money was running out fast.

One night, Christian, my cousin Mark, Sandy and I were together in the bedsit, drunk as usual. Chris and I went to get some Chinese food and came back to an unbelievable scene. Sandy was standing in the middle of the room with a bottle of beer in one hand and a fag in the other, covered in something white from head to toe, as was my whole room. Mark still had the fire extinguisher in his hand and was laughing so much he could hardly speak. He had covered everything with foam, completely trashing the room.

'What have you done? Nice one Mark! I've got nowhere else to go!' I shouted in anger and frustration. Then, after a while, I thought, 'Well, who cares!' I joined in with the laughter and helped trash the rest of the room. We caused mayhem there that night, setting off the fire alarms and getting everybody in the building out of bed.

After all the rioting, Mark and Christian jumped into a taxi to go home while Sandy and I stayed. Sandy was also having a few problems back home, so he wasn't in a rush to go anywhere.

Christian's old room was still empty so we kicked the door open and slept there for the night. When we woke in the morning, Sandy's long hair was sticking up in the air, the foam making it as hard as wood! It was one of the funniest things I had ever seen. It was even funnier when Sandy tried to talk. He wanted to ask where we were, because he had been so drunk that night that he couldn't remember what had happened, but his mouth was so dry that he couldn't. He was still trying to spit white stuff out of his mouth. He seemed really annoyed, but I thought it was hilarious. I fell about, laughing, before he stuck his trilby hat

over his rigid hair, perched about six inches from his head, and we left the bedsit, knowing that we could never go back. We were homeless.

## Chapter 5

### The drug world

I opened my eyes. The canvas roof of my little tent filtered the early morning daylight of summer as I turned over and tried to go back to sleep in the cheap nylon sleeping bag. Sandy stirred next to me. Only half-awake, he reached out for his flagon of cider and put it to his mouth. Sandy liked his drink, even first thing in the morning.

‘Morning, boys,’ came a voice from outside the tent.

‘Alright Chris,’ I replied, recognising his voice.

Christian unzipped the door and crawled in, carrying a plate of buttered toast.

‘Room service,’ he grinned.

We sat up and reached for our slices of cold toast. Then Sandy climbed out of his sleeping bag and went to answer a call of nature and I took my chance to steal his toast.

‘He won’t notice,’ I said, smirking at Christian. ‘He’s too drunk. I think he prefers a liquid breakfast, anyway.’

Sandy and I stayed in the tent behind Christian’s mother’s house for a little while, but then he decided to go home. After that, various people let me sleep on their sofas for a couple of nights. At least it was better than the tent. However, having homes to sleep in didn’t help the deep loneliness I felt. It was ok in the day, when I was with people but, alone in the night, loneliness consumed me. Every night, I struggled to ignore the fearful thoughts and the torment of hope-filled dreams that would probably never come true, and escape into sleep.

My village, Cornelly, was almost a suburb of Porthcawl. Whereas Porthcawl was quite posh, Cornelly was mostly made up of sprawling council estates and, though some areas were



well-kept and there was a pleasant old village centre, there was also a lot of poverty, crime and addiction.

My cousin Mark was now dealing in drugs. He found me places to stay, lodging with other dealers and addicts. It was a busy world where night was no different from day. In fact, it was busier at night, because it was easier to do this work when everyone else was asleep. We would walk through the most run-down streets of Cornelly, usually on council estates, through dismal, shabby houses, the garden walls broken down, and their neglected gardens full of leaking black bin bags and old furniture, broken glass and the occasional abandoned needle making the rough grass dangerous. Often, the front doors were nailed shut to keep out the police or barred with a plank of wood. There were narrow back alleys where druggies kept out of sight of the law and did deals. There, in drug dens well-known to the police, I found shelter. Sometimes I would look after people's houses when they went to prison. It seemed exciting at the time.

Cornelly is a close community and around the pubs and community men soon get to know each other. Some are well-known as people you should not argue with. Mark became 'business partners' with Carl. This man was a good laugh to be with and he and I got on well, but he was also a ruthless character. It was well known in the locality that if you got on the wrong side of him, there could be real trouble. And there were lot's like him. It was a world where people used heavy violence, with all sorts of weapons to make their way in things and survive.

Drug addicts don't always have money to pay for their addiction and dealers sometimes give them time to pay. Those who were genuinely broke were given more time. Those who lied about being able to pay faced a beating, and they knew it. Stories were told of how dealers would put on a balaclava, take a weapon and hunt someone down and do them over, for money. Mark was in the middle of all this, and along with Carl began loan-sharking,

lending money at high interest, very often so that people could buy drugs from them, so that they made money from addicts in two ways. They were always able to get the loan money back because of their frightening reputation.

Before long, I got into crime to finance my own habit.

‘There’s a house full of tools not far from here,’ Mark told me one day.

‘It is being done up. Do you fancy having a go at lifting them for us? We’ll pay you.’

I had never done a burglary.

‘I dunno,’ I said cautiously. ‘Is anybody watching the house?’

‘Nah,’ said Mark. ‘You can take Mick with you. He can get in anywhere.’

‘OK.’ I said ‘I’ll do it’. Money or drugs was always welcome.

Mick was a tall, gangling character, yet he could get through the smallest opening, which made him a good house-breaker.

After dark, we went to the empty house together. I kept watch outside the house, jittery with nerves, while Mick broke in. A few moments later, he opened the door for me, softly calling my name.

‘Here, grab that electric drill,’ he told me. Completely at ease, he walked around the house as if he owned the place, taking everything he wanted.

I picked up the drill and a few other things, trying my best to look confident and not as if I was itching to get out of there.

‘OK, let’s go,’ he said at last, holding two bags full of stuff. Relieved, I nodded and we went out into the darkness, back to the car we had parked a couple of streets away.

Mark and Carl gave me my payoff in drugs.

By now I was using harder drugs and becoming a very different person. I knew that some of the other boys had been injecting drugs, but I hesitated. It was a different level of addiction and there would be no going back. One night, after a party, I told them I was ready.

‘I don’t want to miss out any longer. I want to feel the steal.’

So, that night, I mainlined for the first time.

My mouth watered as I waited for the boys to cook up the drug and get it into a needle. I was fascinated with the whole procedure. When it was ready, they told me to put a belt around my arm to get a vein up. So I did.

‘It is really good gear, so get ready,’ someone said as he turned to me with a syringe in his hand.

I wasn’t keen on needles and I did not know whether to watch it going in or to look away. I watched out of the corner of my eye as he injected the drug into me. Within seconds, I had the biggest rush of my life. My heart pounded and my whole body tingled as rushes went up and down from my head to my toes. It was so strong that I could even taste it. I struggled to get my thoughts together but at the same time surrender to the enjoyment of this amazing feeling. The boys laughed as if it reminded them of when they first did it.

Mark never kept drugs in the house because he was determined not to get caught. He succeeded in this for 17 years. Half-Italian and very family-oriented, Mark looked after me. We became very good friends.

Because of our friendship, he trusted me enough to take me back and forth to his stash and I’d be in the car when he picked up a bag of drugs from the place that he had buried it. I was there, too, when he weighed the drugs and bagged them ready for sale. Before long, I was the one going to the stash to pick up the gear. I moved fast, sticking the bags down my pants in case the police pulled us. Then we drove to the houses where the gear was dropped off to customers. We delivered drugs all day, every day. At first, Mark would call his customers to say that I would be dropping off the gear, but as I got to know them, I was trusted by them. I was getting more and more comfortable with the job, increasingly becoming part of the drug-dealing world.

Needing to finance expensive drug habits, many of my new friends had served time in prison for drug-related crime. Most had experienced terrible family problems, complete neglect or severe domestic violence, although a few came from decent families. Some of these men were pretty scary. Others were weak and sad individuals who needed to numb the pain of their many failures. I could certainly identify with them.

People did all sorts of things to get drugs. One way was to steal credit cards and then use them to get stuff from shops, taking the cards to their limit, then use the goods to buy drugs. We dealers had clothes on order and ate the best food, living like royalty. It was all pretty easy in those days because security on bank cards was much more relaxed than it is now.

Johnny was cool-headed and cheeky, one of the best at using stolen cards. One day, in a busy store, he had to queue to pay for the goods. When he reached the head of the line, the cashier looked at her computerised till and said,

‘You can’t pay with this card! It has been cancelled.’

Some would have run away at that point, while the more cool-headed might have said that they would speak to the bank about it. Not Johnny! He made a real fuss.

‘I don’t understand that!’ he said. ‘It is really embarrassing! I did cancel the card, because I lost it. But I found it again and called the bank to tell them so. They should not have stopped my card. I want to speak to the manager!’

Using the store’s telephone, he called the bank right there and then and they reactivated the card! We had a good laugh when he came back and told us what had happened. That was not the only laugh we had.

Roly, a well-known junkie in the area, often stole things to exchange for drugs.

‘I’ve got some paintings,’ he told us one day. ‘They are worth a fortune. Come and see them and maybe we can trade.’

So we went to meet him. Mark looked at the paintings first and I heard him say,

‘You have painted these yourself, haven’t you?’

‘I found them in an antique shop,’ Roly insisted. ‘They could be priceless!’

‘Come and have a look at these Neil’ Mark said. When I looked at them I burst out laughing.

They were terrible! We had a good laugh and Mark gave him a bag of drugs anyway.

‘Just pay me when you get your next giro,’ he said.

There was never a dull moment as we delivered the stuff.

Doing a lot of amphetamines can really play tricks with someone’s mind. Dai had been awake for days when he asked us to bring some stuff over.

‘There are people in the attic,’ he told us earnestly. ‘I can hear them. And there’s someone behind the sofa as well, but I just can’t catch him. Every time I put my arm in to grab him, he runs to the other end.’

‘I tell you what, then,’ said Mark, winking at me. ‘I’ll put my arm behind the settee this end and you put your arm in the other end and we’ll see if we can grab him.’

So they did. Dai put in his arm and grabbed.

‘I got him! I got him!’ he shouted.

We all fell about laughing as he discovered he had grasped Mark’s arm reaching in from the other end of the sofa.

At weekends, we went clubbing in Swansea or Cardiff, sometimes further away. We would get off our heads on drugs and dance for most of the night in raves.

One night we got hold of some ecstasy tablets called ‘China Whites.’ The word was that they were strong enough to blow your head off. As usual, I was up for it. Knowing very well it was dangerous, we decided to inject them. We cooked up the drug, putting it on a spoon and heating it over a gas flame, and then put it in the works (syringe). I injected and almost immediately, a powerful high started. The drug sent me up and up and up, until I thought my heart would explode. I slid down the wall, holding my head, and slumped to the floor. It was

scary. Then, as I pulled the needle out of my arm, two police officers burst in through the back door. They ran straight past me because they were after another guy, who was in the kitchen. I was still on the floor with my head in my hands and a syringe beside me, close to having a heart attack from the combination of drugs and coppers.

We got everything out of the house pretty rapidly in case the police came back for us, but they did not. So we went clubbing and did I have a good time! Music and drugs together give you quite a buzz! I had been close to overdosing and I knew it could kill me, but hey, the risk was the thing.

I was willing to try anything but I was glad that I still had my old friend, amphetamines, to give me a boost and make me feel good, their effects keeping me going for a few hours before I needed more.

One night one of the boys broke into the local chemist and stole bottles of Tamazi 'juice'. Tamazi is a downer that works like valium. At one time, you could get it in 'egg' (capsule) form, but they were banned because some people - junkies like us - opened the capsules and injected the fluid. It is a thick liquid and could congeal in your veins, blocking the blood flow and causing a heart attack. Apparently some had died because of it. On the way back from clubbing, we injected the 'juice', heedless of the danger. Whenever we injected drugs, we knew this could be the last time we would ever do it. We dived constantly with death, living on the edge. I did not know how else to live.

My relationships with family and girlfriends never worked. I often smashed things and screamed in anger because it seemed that no-one could give me the love that I was so desperately looking for. Yet when people did try to get close, I pushed them away.

Once, in my frustration, I took a lot of tablets to try to finish my life. Instead, I spent three days in hospital, feeling very vulnerable and ready to cry for the smallest reason, though I struggled to keep up my hard image. I was referred to a psychiatrist who told me that I was

having a nervous breakdown. It was, he said, all linked to my childhood. Surprise, surprise! He let me go home, telling me to make further appointments to talk to him. Instead, I spent two days in bed staring at the ceiling and then did what I knew best – I injected drugs. It did seem to give me strength, snapping me out of my vulnerability and giving me a boost of confidence. So I did not deal with my issues. As usual, I looked for escape.

Then I had a brilliant idea. I was going to join the army. There, I thought, I could become the person I longed to be. It was arranged that I would start in January. That gave me a few months to think and also to do as many drugs as possible. I figured that, when the day came to go, it would be the turning point in my life when everything would change.

## Chapter 6

### The Army

I looked out of the train window, watching the fields and towns and thinking about the mess that I had made of my life. I thought, too, about my hopes and dreams, feeling a sense of freedom and the excitement of new adventure.

‘I am joining the army,’ I repeated to myself, trying to take in the reality of it. ‘This is an opportunity to sort my life out, a chance for a course-correction.’ I figured that it had to be. I really wanted to be free of my mistakes. I had always wanted to be free. It was just so hard to break free of old habits and old relationships.

At the station at Pirbright, a crowd of boys waited for a lift to the barracks. I wasn’t an expert with accents but could recognise that there were guys there from Scotland, England and Ireland - and Wales, too, I knew that accent pretty well. Some stood in groups, talking and laughing, while others waited alone as if wondering how they would fit in. I stood alone, too, observing.

When word went out that our lift had arrived, we made our way to the minibuses parked out by the front entrance. Then we were off, making our way to the barracks. I looked around at the other boys’ expressions and wondered what my face showed of my conflicting excitement and fear of the unknown.

For the first few weeks we lived in shabby dormitories in a run-down annexe. It was a way of giving us a short, sharp education in army life. The lesson was that army life was going to be tough. We had to learn to stand to attention when an officer spoke to us, march to the canteen for food, and get up at 5a.m. in order to be on parade by six.



‘Haven’t you heard someone asked? This is what they call discipline. You’d better get used to it. This is nothing compared to what is to come.’

One of the things we had to deal with was being shouted at and insulted without showing any emotion. At about three o’clock one morning, the corporals woke us and made us stand outside in the cold wearing only our boxer shorts. For about forty five minutes, we stood and shivered as they talked amongst themselves. Every now and then they would shout at us, ‘Brace up and focus! This is the army, boys. You’re not home with Mummy now!’

Strangely, I enjoyed the challenge of all this. I was free of drugs and my head was the clearest it had been for a long while. After the experiences I had had on the streets, what was happening in the army was child’s play. I started to train again and organised some competitions among the other boys, seeing how many pull-ups and press-ups we could do. It really felt like I was part of a community of men who were engaged in an important purpose. I began to realise that I could be good at this soldier business.

There were twenty recruits in each room, so there was plenty of chance to get to know people. We were quite an assortment! Some were funny, some more serious, some extravert and others awkward and shy, most of them decent people. They knew nothing about my background and I felt I could start again, mixing with them on equal terms.

Soon, we were transferred to better accommodation and assigned to our various troops and sergeants. We were to be there for the next twelve weeks getting our basic training as soldiers. I was in Dalton troop.

I have always been able to get on with people and fit in and I made some good friends. One of the first boys I met was a guy named Harrison. The first time I met him we were both in the smoking corner, enjoying a fag.

‘Watch this now,’ Harrison said, grinning. With that, he pushed his thumb into the front of my new jumper, making a hollow. Then he put his cigarette in there and stubbed it out, while I watched in horror.

‘Man, I hope you know what you’re doing!’ I thought. ‘I like this jumper!’

After a moment, he pulled out his thumb and, to my amazement and relief there was nothing wrong with my jumper, not even a mark.

‘How did you do that?’ I asked.

‘I can’t tell you that,’ he replied, grinning.

But, after some nagging, he gave in and showed me the trick. He had been wearing a rubber thumb over his own and he had pushed this in first to hold the cigarette.

‘That’s awesome!’ I said, laughing, and encouraged him to play the trick on as many as he could for the rest of the evening.

Harrison was a popular lad. He made people laugh and used his magic tricks to impress them. If what you see in the movies is true, I thought, and there is always one joker who keeps the place alive, then it was Harrison.

He was also very good at ironing and, during our locker inspections, his neatly organised clothes were constantly held up as an example for the rest of us. We were impressed until we found out the reason for this perfection. It was because he never changed his clothes. He had set up his locker at the beginning of the course and he stuck with it. If he dirtied his clothes he washed the same ones quickly and put them back on.

My locker, however, was regularly trashed, because I was very bad at ironing. The corporal on duty would pull out absolutely every item in disgust and throw it on the floor.

One day I worked very hard to put my locker in order for the daily inspection, but unfortunately I had forgotten that I had a box of apples on the floor under my bed. Not allowed!

‘What’s this, Harvey?’ Corporal Sydney shouted, his face next to mine and his eyes bulging. What’s the problem?’ I wondered. I was sure my locker was tip top this time. Then I remembered the apples! I watched in horror as the corporal tipped them all onto the floor. When he had gone, I had to crawl around on my hands and knees, picking them all up again.

However, the corporals must have thought that I had leadership skills because before long I was made room senior. My job was to make sure that all the other boys in my room were doing what they were supposed to do! Gravelle, a stocky and rather serious guy, liked me and wanted to help me, but his idea of helping was to beat up anybody who did not do as I said. When someone admitted breaking a rule, once, Gravelle ran across the room without any warning, dived on top of him and started hitting him. He thought that people in the army should accept discipline and the only methods of enforcement he knew were threats and violence. Yet, oddly, he was a nice guy.

During those 12 weeks, we were pushed to the limit, both physically and mentally. Life included intense training and a lot of discipline. We had to be at least five minutes early for everything. Even if you were four minutes early, you were late and in trouble! There were many such rules, designed, I suppose, to test our ability to discipline ourselves and to accept discipline from others. Some lads, exposed to this pressure, cracked after a few weeks, feeling that they did not belong and wanted to go home. Other boys showed no mercy, made fun of them and called them names.

‘Wuss! Big baby!’ they taunted. ‘You just don’t want to pull your weight. Better go home to Mammy.’

I felt sorry for them. These broken, humiliated recruits learnt the hard way that they were not cut out for army life. Every so often, there was a ‘window’ for getting out of the army, and there were usually one or two who did.

But I had finally found a place where I could thrive, largely because the army set me free from the responsibility to keep myself away from drugs. One of the good things about army life was that, in a sense, I did not have any responsibility; the army did everything for me. When a recruit joins up, he is even asked whether he has debts and if he does, the authorities make sure his debts are paid out of his wages. I liked the safety I was being offered; all they expected of me was that I would become a good soldier. And that was something I really wanted to do.

## Chapter 7

### Success at last!

We seldom dealt with the sergeant who was in charge of the whole troop. The corporals, our section commanders, handled daily discipline. Friendly and approachable when we had a problem, they could change in a moment and as the weeks passed, they seemed increasingly frustrated with us. They shouted and screamed at us constantly, pushing us as hard as they could.

‘You wait until we are out on exercise!’ they threatened. ‘In the camp you have the PTI’s (physical training instructors) to save you but when we are out there you are *all ours!*’

The PTIs, who monitored our reactions when we were training, pushed us as far as they thought wise and then called a halt, but they were not with us when we were on exercise out of the barracks. Then the corporals pushed us without mercy.

On our first exercise, we marched out of the barracks grounds carrying our weapons and supplies. Once in the hillsides and wooded areas, we lived as if we were out in battle, enduring the same sort of pressure. Corporal Bradley bellowed,

‘On my first whistle get down and start crawling! On my second whistle, get up and start running!’

We ran and crawled alternately, in response to that piercing whistle. Every time it blew, I was in a puddle, but I still had to get down and crawl on my belly carrying a fifty pound pack on my back. There could be no cheating; other corporals ran around us, putting their foot on our backs if we did not get right down and screaming,

‘If you can’t do this properly, you can carry on doing it all day!’

It was tough and we kept it up until we were exhausted. Next to me, a lad collapsed and, humiliatingly, started to cry.

‘I can’t take any more,’ he wept as a corporal bawled at him to stop behaving like a baby, pull himself together and get moving.

We soon learnt that when that happened, we were all punished. The rest of us had to run even harder. The corporal screamed,

‘Harvey! Harrison! Get alongside and carry him!’

I loved it, relishing the challenge of being taken to my absolute limits. It reminded me of the training I used to do in the past. More than once, Corporal Bradley stared me in the eye and predicted,

‘You are going to crack, Harvey!’

I responded with confidence and iron resolution,

‘Never!’

However, no matter what you felt about being on exercise, everybody looked forward to getting back to the barracks and having a good rest. It was strange how those barracks, that had not originally felt much like home, now did.

On Friday afternoon, as I sat in a classroom studying theory, I heard the sound of marching feet outside. Passing out parades always took place on Friday. Basic training over, some new soldiers were being marched through the barracks to the parade square, wearing Number Two’s, very smart uniforms kept for special occasions. Their families were waiting in the stadium, where they were treated to an impressive demonstration of army drill as the soldiers showed off their newly-acquired skills.

I listened half-heartedly to our instructor in the classroom, but I could hear the distracting sound of drums and trumpets and wished I could watch the parade.

‘It must be an awesome experience,’ I thought, ‘Being presented to a crowd of people, all dressed up and doing a demonstration with your weapons must be wonderful!’

I wasn’t the only one and sometimes the teacher would have to call for our attention as boys drifted off into their thoughts.

‘You’re not there yet, lads,’ he told us. ‘Concentrate on what you are doing!’

‘One day...’ I thought, longing for that day when I would make my family proud as I marched out onto the parade square.

When my turn came, it was all that I had hoped for. The weather was perfect for a parade and I played my part without mistakes. After the parade, we went to the clubhouse, where our families waited. My mother, my stepfather and my father were all there, very proud of me. I was very proud of myself. I felt that I had achieved something and finally made a success of my life. To my parents, it must have seemed like the end of their worries about me.

As we got into the car after the ceremony, my father turned the key to start the engine. As he did the radio came on, playing a very popular song of the moment. One of the lines was ‘The drugs don’t work.’ I smiled to myself.

‘No, the drugs don’t work!’ I thought.

How glad I was to be away from that way of life.

Dalton Troop had made our own T-shirts. On the back was the slogan, ‘Came as boys, left as men.’

‘Who knows,’ I thought, ‘Maybe that has become true of me.’

When I first signed up, I decided to join the Royal Logistics Core and become a Supply Specialist, providing supplies to soldiers in battle. It meant that I would learn to drive not only cars but heavy goods vehicles. I figured that getting qualifications like this would see me through life. But as my first twelve weeks ended, I knew I wanted something more exciting. I decided to become a Pioneer. These infantry soldiers work on the battle front and clear the

way forward, for example by building bridges. Even more than the excitement of it, I wanted to be a very good soldier, the best, and this definitely meant more training.

When I told the other boys, they thought I was crazy.

‘You’ll have to go to Catterick for another fourteen weeks’ training!’ they said. ‘It is really hard there.’

Their words only made me look forward to it more. I wanted to be all I could become, stronger and fitter and more highly trained. I loved the idea of working in a team equipped to face great danger, where people would give their lives for one another.

Things started badly at Catterick. Returning from leave a day late, I missed the transport and had to make my own way by train. It was just a mistake but my new sergeant was not too happy!

“Harvey, get in here!” he screamed from his office, his voice resounding down the corridor.

After giving me his assessment of my character, which was not flattering, he handed me a couple of forms. One was blank and the other had been filled in by someone else and contained his personal details. The sergeant did not want to waste time explaining to me what he had already told everyone else on the previous day.

‘Go and fill this in, exactly like this other one!’ he said, and dismissed me.

So off I went to my room and filled in the blank form. The trouble was that I really did fill in the blank form *exactly* like the other one - with all the other guy’s details! You do strange things under pressure! When I took it back, the sergeant looked at it for a moment before turning to the other leaders in the room.

‘We’ve got a fine one here! Have a look at what he has done!’

At that moment, I realised my mistake. I waited miserably, feeling a complete idiot, while they all had a good laugh.

‘This is not a good start, Neil!’ I thought. ‘This is not the sort of place to be “half-soaked”!’



Catterick was certainly a place where you needed to be on the ball. The training was much harder than at Pirbright but, once again, I loved the challenge and knew that I stood out from among the other boys. It wasn't long before I was getting attention from the leaders.

We were taken for a battle run one day. They tried to make it as real as possible, as if we were really marching into battle, and I threw myself right into it.

'You are about 6 miles from the battle front,' we were told. 'Your task is to march into battle!'

We marched as a platoon, in four sections of ten men, each commanded by a corporal. It was very hot, but we were not allowed to take off our helmets or any other clothing during this fast march. There was a lot to carry. Everyone had his own personal weapon and the webbing where he kept his ammunition. In addition, we took into battle a snipers' rifle, called an LSW, taking it in turns to carry it. We also carried an LAW (a light anti-tank weapon). Our duty was to look after each other and to help one another carry the equipment. An army truck followed us to pick up any soldier who could not march any longer. However, few people gave up, because anyone who did this more than once would get major harassment at the back of the barracks from the other boys. Soldiers who were taken onto the truck were 'casualties' and out of the battle. However, even though they may have gotten onto the bus, their kit was still useful to us. We were told we had to pick them up and carry them as well. Very often, I would be among those marching with two weapons and two sets of webbing, as well as taking my turn with the larger weapons.

I realised that I was thriving under pressure and loved to spur the other guys on when we were out running and exercising.

Once, when we were out on exercise, we marched up the side of a mountain. I came across a soldier sitting on the ground and clutching his leg in pain. A corporal was screaming at him

but he could not get up, so I hooked my arm around him and lifted him to his feet. He put his foot down and cried out in agony.

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘You can make it!’

We set off, while I supported him. It was slow, but I stuck by his side and we got to the top of a mountain together, both exhilarated by the achievement. He turned out to have broken his ankle and had achieved the impossible in finishing the march.

I revelled in the challenge of all this and was really shining. In Week Twelve, there was a live firing exercise called the March and Shoot exercise. Previously, we had gone out with blank ammunition but now we were out for a week using real bullets. It was exciting, but I knew that I had to be thoroughly alert because accidental shootings were not unknown. My ten-man section attacked a bunker; some soldiers ran ahead while others lay on the floor and fired to give cover.

Later, each soldier walked alone through a wooded area, in simulated battle conditions, observed by a corporal. As we walked, targets (pictures of human beings) popped up and we had to shoot them as quickly as possible while avoiding being shot ourselves. I loved this, rolling around in the mud, popping up behind bunkers and shooting at targets, having a whale of a time. I thought I was Rambo! Then, like the other soldiers, I had to cross a river where I could see that there was a bridge. Unknown to me, the bridge had been rigged with a fake bomb. It could be seen – if, in the heat of the moment, you remembered to look. Fortunately, I did notice and crossed the river another way. I was given the highest marks out of everyone. Corporal Roberts took me aside one day and said,

‘You are doing really well. I cannot say too much, but keep going the way you are at the moment because it will be worth it for you.’

He did not seem to have said this to anybody else and I wondered if he meant that I would win the Best Student award. I knew that other soldiers were talking about whether I would win it.

On our way back to barracks at the end of the live firing week, our Commanding Officer announced the prize-winners. The three main prizes were Most Improved Soldier, Best of Fitness and Best Student. It was a great feeling to hear my name being called out as Best Student. Out of 40 soldiers, I had been considered the best. My platoon also won the march-and-shoot exercise. My battle partner and I won Best Battle Pair. As I marched smartly forward to collect my prizes at our Passing Out Parade, my degraded life as a druggie in South Wales seemed a million miles away. I understood at last what it meant to have self-respect.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Failure again**

I was sent to the notorious Deep Cut, also called Blackdown Barracks, a holding place where soldiers are sent to await postings all over the world. I was awaiting transfer to the Pioneers' barracks at Bicester where, I was told, I would move quickly through the ranks to a leadership position.

Deep Cut, for me, was an extremely demoralising place where you could wait for months before being moved to your units and getting properly involved in army life again. There were courses, but not everyone needed them. A lot of drinking went on and, bored and purposeless, I joined in now and again. I had been OK when I was focused, but at Blackdown I was losing my sense of personal direction. It would lead to disaster for me as a soldier.

Major Rowlands was the Commanding officer of my platoon at Deep Cut. He was a good soldier who wore the Green Beret, a badge of the Royal Marines. This meant that he had done a commando course (a shortened, but very intense version of the Royal Marines training course). When he saw me with another soldier near his office, he came and talked to us, asking our names and what we were doing. I told him that I had been to Catterick and won Best Student. After that, he often talked to me when he saw me about the barracks. I thought a lot about doing the commando course myself. Many people failed it, but if you passed you earned the status of wearing the highly-respected Green Beret.

As I talked with the Major, I thought I might even take things one step further and join the Royal Marines. The Royal Marines were respected soldiers and as always, I wanted to be the best.

I was recommended for the Marines and, after a few phone calls from Major Rowland's, I was accepted. So the plan was now to go to Plymouth and do another 6 months training when I had finished the Pioneers course. The other Pioneers thought I was totally nuts.

'You're crazy,' they said. 'You have it all laid out for you at Bicester. You have already earned your respect there. Why are joining the Marines?'

Another one of the boys was also changing. His name was Bircher and he was going to join the Para's.

The Major allowed us to make our own programme rather than do the usual day-to-day activities that the others were doing. It was great to have that freedom. Every day, we sprinted up hills wearing back packs and finding other equally challenging activities to develop our fitness. Both of us were super-fit.

When I was away and training I was ok, but when I went home on leave, the old temptations were still there.

One weekend when I was home, I made a disastrous mistake.

I was at an old friend's house and, after a drink or two, we were talking about drugs. As it had always done in the past, my stomach turned over as I thought about what it would be like to have that rush again.

'I've got some good gear,' he told me. After that, it wasn't long before we were on our way to do some drugs.

Any soldier caught taking drugs earns instant dismissal. When I went back to camp on Monday, hoping to get away with this lapse into my old ways, my luck was out. Orders were given to lock the gates. There was to be a Compulsory Drug's Test, a 'CDT', and everyone on camp was to be tested, from the top officers to the bottom recruits. Only three soldiers in ten would be tested thoroughly, and even then only for certain substances, so I hoped for the

best. But I was one of those randomly selected for testing. Weeks later, the results finally came. As I walked through the camp, an officer came up to me and said simply,

‘You’ve been caught.’

I went cold, knowing that everything would change from this point. There was a possibility that I might be sent to Colchester to the army prison, instead of being thrown out. If you were a decent soldier, the army might do that in order to keep you. They had spent a lot of money on your training and you were worth something to them. But because I was leaving the army and joining the marines, the CO was not on my side and my best ally, Major Rowland’s, happened to be on holiday and could not fight my corner.

That morning, I had helped a friend move to another block. He was waiting to be discharged, on compassionate grounds, because someone in his family had died. Later that same day, I was in the same block myself, waiting to be thrown out. It was that quick and that final.

I tried to tell myself that I did not really care but deep down in my heart, I was devastated. I loved being a soldier and I was really good at it. It lasted for such a short time and there was absolutely no hope of sorting this one out. What would I do next? I wondered. Was there any hope at all for my life? Like old friends, but ones I had hopes to outgrow, failure and rejection were back in my life.

## Chapter 9

### Big Trouble

It did not take me long to get back into drugs. How else was I going to numb my pain over my latest failure and the terrible loss of my identity as a soldier? I had thought the army was going to be my answer, but once again I had let myself down.

‘I feel like there’s a curse over my life or something,’ I thought despairingly.

I was becoming more and more thoroughly a nasty person. The sensitive Neil would sometimes pop his head up, but I was forgetting him. The evil Neil I had seen in my vision of the cage now dominated my life. I felt a real tension inside, almost as though I had a split personality. On one hand, I would sometimes act as a peacemaker when we went collecting money, asking for time for the addict about to be beaten up because he hadn’t paid. But on the other hand, I would sometimes encourage and cheer the violence I witnessed or take part in it.

There were still times when I tried to get back into training and make something of it. I even trained for the Mr. Wales competition. I was going to enter the competition with a guy by the name of Chris Jenkins from Port Talbot. We had trained a few times together and he had already put his name down for the competition. At first, I was up for it but of course it would never be long before I would start injecting again and then everything else went out of the window. Chris went on to win the competition, becoming Mr. Wales in his weight category, and he has since gone on to win some world records in power-lifting. I did continue to train, though, and took steroids again to bulk up.

One day, a guy called Den drove up in his expensive car, wound down the window and called to me. Den was a well-known local drug dealer. We were friends, but in the drug world even good friends can fall out.

‘You owe me money,’ he snapped.

‘I don’t know what you mean.’ I spoke coolly but my heart was pounding and I was thinking fast. ‘Maybe this is because Mark had some gear from him before he went into prison and did not have time to sort out the money. Maybe he did not get the chance to sell them,’ I guessed.

‘Where is the stuff?’ Den demanded.

‘Why are you asking me? Mark got the drugs from you, not me,’ I replied firmly.

‘If I find out you and Gareth took those drugs, I’ll kill you both!’

He was about to drive off but I thought, I need to deal with this!

‘Let’s sort it out now.’ I challenged him. I wanted to try to talk to him about it but he was still fuming. As he got out of his car, I saw him glance down at the baseball bat he usually carried with him, though he did not pick it up. He moved towards me aggressively and I threw a punch, knowing I had to do something. Den is not the sort of person you don’t want to get on the wrong side of, but he was going to lash out at me.

I felt my fist connect and he staggered backwards, clutching his face.

‘Man, that’s a purler!’ he said. To my relief, he turned to get back into his car.

‘Wait here! I’ll be back!’ With that angry command, he drove off.

I was not going to wait around for more trouble and made myself scarce.

News quickly got about that Den and I had had a fight.

‘Watch your back!’ friends warned. I knew this was serious.

For about a week, all was quiet and I did not even see him, although usually he drove around the area often. Then on the following Saturday night, as Gareth and I were walking to a training session, Den’s car came around the corner. I could see that he had two passengers.



Sammy, who was 6'4" and about 18 stone and had been in prison many times for violence, was one of them. There was someone else in the back seat but I didn't recognise him. I braced myself for trouble, but they drove past and disappeared around the corner. We walked on. I was on the alert, wondering what was going to happen next. I sensed Den would soon be back.

'Excuse me,' someone called from behind me.

Agitated and looking around nervously, I stopped to speak to him.

The guy wanted directions. I tried to tell him the route but he kept on asking the same question, while I grew increasingly nervous and impatient. Then Den's car pulled up beside me and he and Sammy got out.

*'I am going to have to fight for my life,'* I thought.

As I was thinking about what to do, the guy asking directions suddenly stabbed me. I felt a cold, ugly sensation in my leg as the knife went in deeply, touching the bone. He was the man who had been sitting in the back of the car, a hit man paid by Den.

The pain was excruciating but, in fear that he would stick it in me again, I ran! I glanced back to see him still standing with the knife in his hand. Gareth ran off, too, in the opposite direction. Den chased me on foot while Sammy jumped back in the car and tried to run me down. As the car screamed towards me, I jumped over the bonnet, running through the back alleys while Den shouted abuse at me. As I ran, the wound opened up and blood poured out, but I knew that, if I stopped, I would be a dead man. Somehow, fear and adrenaline kept me from collapsing.

Finally, at the end of my strength and faint from loss of blood, I managed to fling myself behind some bushes, my heart pounding with fear. Desperately considering my options, I remembered that a guy I knew was living not far away. I dragged myself to his door,

staggered in and collapsed on the kitchen floor. He must have called an ambulance because soon both they and the police showed up.

The medics bound up my leg and I was rushed to hospital. An emergency doctor told me, ‘This wound was very close to the main artery. If it had been even a few millimetres further over, it would have severed your artery and you would be dead.’

After this, I spent a month on crutches, constantly looking over my shoulder when I went out.

Not long afterwards, Den’s car pulled up beside me in the street. I braced myself for trouble.

‘Shall we leave things where they are, then?’ he suggested mildly. ‘Water under the bridge and all that...’

Relieved, I was more than happy to agree. We shook hands and were on good terms again. It was all over!

That is the way it is in that world. Arguments can be a very serious matter.

When Den was in prison recently, I heard that he had been thinking a lot about the stabbing and was feeling really bad about it. I wrote to him telling him it would be great to visit him. He wrote back, signing himself ‘Your friend’ Den. We never spoke about it but the visit eased it.

## Chapter 10

### Humiliation

Violence was never far away. I often felt out of my depth knowing that some of the guys I mixed with were hard characters and not too different from Den. I did not want to get into violence but it came with the territory. You had to keep your eyes open.

Ernie was a real handful. He could fight well with his fists but would think nothing of using a weapon if needed. Well known in the prison system and feared by many people, he was about six feet tall and walked with his broad shoulders forward like the prize fighter he could have been. We had gone out with the same girl and so, wanting to prove a point, he came to my house one day to look for me. Mark and I were known as hard characters and Ernie wanted to fight one of us so that he could improve his own reputation. He thrived on having a certain kind of reputation and seemed to be afraid of nothing.

Guessing what was coming, I had been carrying a knife with me, even sleeping with a screwdriver beside me. As it happened, I was with a friend in a car outside my flat when Ernie finally came to get me. He was with another guy. They walked past us and hammered on my door.

‘This is it!’ I thought as I went to face him.

‘I hear you said you are going to beat me up!’ he said, challenging me.

‘Not true,’ I replied as coolly as I could.

‘That’s what I heard,’ Ernie insisted.

I met his eyes.

‘Well, just remember you came knocking on my door. I did not knock on yours.’

‘It does not matter,’ he replied, getting to the real purpose of his visit. ‘Let’s have a fight. Let’s see what you are made of. I heard you can do the business.’

I shook my head, with a firm ‘No!’ I knew that if a fight started I would have to be ready to take it all the way, and I wasn’t ready for that.

Ernie swung a punch at me but I would not respond, figuring that if I did, I would be badly hurt.

‘I can get plenty of boys to come and sort you and Mark out,’ he taunted.

I could not think of a reply. I did not want to get Mark involved because he had children. Also at the time a few of the boys I knew best were in prison, so I didn’t really have any backing.

Ernie turned to leave, evidently thinking that a challenge was enough today.

‘I’ll be back,’ he warned.

I didn’t dare go into my flat, so I started to walk. I had not gone far when I bumped into Bert Cooper. I knew Bert from when I went to Sunday school as a child. Whenever I saw him, he made a fuss of me. Somehow, I felt safe while I was with him. I can’t recall what he said to me but no doubt it was something about God. He had done that before when I had met him in the street. I wished I could stay with him.

For the next few days I went into hiding. I knew Ernie would come back, probably with a gang of other boys. Looking for a place where they would not find me, I stayed with the mother of an old friend; I knew that she would not ask too many questions.

For the next three days, I tried to figure out what would happen next and what I would do about it. Then, on my way to visit my mother, I saw three cars driving bunched together. I hid and watched, just in case this was Ernie and, sure enough, he was in one of them. Three car loads of boys had come to look for me. Some of the boys were bouncers and hard boys.

When they found that I was not at my house, they smashed all the windows as their calling card, and then went to search for me in the streets of Cornelly. I was out of my depth and feared for my life.

Part of me wanted to fight him but I could not bring myself to pick up the phone and call him. I was painfully aware that Ernie had really cut me down to size. People would soon get to know that I turned down that fight and I felt humiliated. But I thought about where it might end if he got the better of me in a fight; I might be killed, and I was afraid to die. So I had to leave it there, knowing that my reputation in the area was seriously damaged. Luckily, I managed to spend some time working out of the area, to allow things to cool down.

Then Mark got involved. People used to talk about who would win if Ernie and Mark had a fight. They arranged to meet, probably just to size each other up. Mark took a machete with him, in case this turned out to be an ambush, but when they met, there was instant mutual respect. Mark invited him back to his house, they talked all night and Ernie promised that he would apologise to me. He never did, but at least the warfare was over.

Something had happened to me, though. I had lost and I knew it. I did not have the bottle to fight him and my reputation – and my pride – were seriously damaged. People had lost respect for me and that was dangerous. Failure was catching up with me again.

There was something really evil about the whole thing. For weeks, I even had nightmares of being killed. When I was away working, I had to stay in a hotel. The story replayed in my mind and I felt an irrational fear that was somehow driven by evil. One night, I picked up a Bible that had been left there and found in it a prayer against fear and for help. I didn't know anything about God but I prayed that prayer.

## Chapter 11

### The House

Before long, life settled down and I felt ready to have another shot at things. I had a job and was earning quite a lot of money, enough for the deposit on a house in Cornelly. I decided it was time to have my own place.

I was proud of my house, at first. It had three bedrooms, with a conservatory at the back, and a porch at the front, as I liked to tell people. Having my own place was the best feeling. Freedom!

The boys often came over for drug parties. We had some really good laughs; some of the head bangers who came back and forth really knew how to have a good time. At first, I had a certain amount of respect for the fabric of the house, thinking that I might settle down a bit. But I was only kidding myself. Before long, it was more of a drugs den than a home.

One day I bumped into Bert Cooper again. Bert as usual he had something to say about God. Most people thought he was over the top with his church stuff, but I liked him, as long as our conversations didn't go on too long. Every now and then he would pop up in my life, as he had when I had a run-in with Ernie. Another time in the past, when he had turned up out of the blue, it was to do with a job.

'I spoke with the foreman of the building site up the road the other day for you', he said. 'If you go up and see him, he's got a job for you.'

'Thank you.' I said politely, thinking, 'How does he know I want a job?'

I was half-expecting him to say, 'Come on I'll take you up there now.'

When I met him this time, Bert told me of a house where he had been to pray because some strange things had been going on there.

‘Man, this guy is radical,’ I thought. ‘Or crazy!’ I couldn’t quite figure out which.

‘What are you up to?’ he asked, his eyes searching me. His question seemed quite direct, as if he knew some things about me.

‘Not so much.’ I replied.

‘I would like to pray in your house, if you’ll let me.’ Bert looked at me steadily.

‘What for?’

He answered seriously, ‘I think there are evil things in your house, because of the lifestyle you are living.’

‘Do you think so?’ Secretly, I agreed with him. I was completely irreligious, but in some deep, neglected part of me, there was a longing for something better than I knew. So I was not closed to the idea of prayer - as long as I did not have to do the praying.

I took Bert to my house to do his stuff. He seemed like one of the Ghostbusters as he went around commanding this and that to get out. I was impressed! He told me that he could sense evil spirits there, and that they were running away from him as he walked through the house. After he had finished downstairs he began to make his way upstairs. I wasn’t expecting that and I knew there were things lying around there that I didn’t want him to see. I tried to get ahead of him so that I could hide the stuff.

When Bert had finished in the house, he wanted to go out the back to the garden sheds. Interested in what he was doing, I went out with him.

‘There he is, an old guy about 65 years of age, coming against demons and all sorts,’ I thought, Part of me decided that this guy was crazy but I could not help thinking, ‘He’s got some guts!’

‘They are in here, too,’ Bert said as he made his way into the sheds. He had his eye on one in particular, which was strange as I did drugs in there a lot, as well as stashing them in that

shed. He began to pray over them. Then he looked at me with great intensity and authority, so that I felt very uneasy.

'Man, is he demon-possessed?' I wondered. 'Either that, or he thinks I am!'

Bert came towards me.

'What is he going to do now?' I wondered nervously.

He laid his hands on me, one on my shoulder, the other on my head, and started to pray, commanding something to get out of me.

'I hope nobody is looking, like the neighbours,' I thought, 'Otherwise we'll both get locked up!'

Strangely though, after he left I sensed that the atmosphere in the house was a bit different, not so heavy. For a few days, I even considered looking more into it but before long I picked up my old habits again, in full swing. I had to admit, though, that there was something supernatural about Bert's prayers.

One night, I went to get some steroids for a friend who had started training and wanted the boost. Dean, the dealer worked as a bouncer at local night clubs. It would turn out to be a nightmare of an evening.

'Have you heard about Gareth?' These were almost the first words Dean spoke to me.

'No, what's happened?'

'He hung himself last night!'

The impact of his words almost knocked me off my feet.

'Don't lie!' I was clutching at anything, not to have to believe it.

'I wouldn't lie about that. He hung himself from a tree in Porthcawl Comp. The caretaker found him. He had to cut him down.'

My thoughts whirled. 'I've got to go,' I told Dean. I had to find out if Mark knew. They were such close friends.



As I went into Mark's house, his girlfriend, Kath, said, "He's upstairs." Her expression told me all I needed to know.

Mark was sitting on the edge of the bath in a state of utter shock. I slumped to the floor with my head in my hands, and cried.

I couldn't stay there for long. I went to find Rosemary, Gareth's girlfriend. There were several friends at her house, crying or just wandering around in a daze. I was the same. I couldn't stay there long either. My next visit was to the school where he had hung himself. Walking through the grounds, I cried out despairingly, 'Why? Why did you do it?'

For the rest of that strange, sad week, I kept away from Mark. I didn't want to talk about Gareth and what had happened, so I stayed in my house and tried to numb my feelings with drugs.

Still, it just didn't make any sense. Gareth had seemed to be getting his life together. He'd been doing fewer drugs and appeared to be settling down. He found a job and Rosemary had a baby. Then – boom! He killed himself.

By the time the funeral came I was totally off my head because of the drugs I had done that week. Rosemary virtually had to be carried into the church, as if all the strength had gone from her in the grief and shock of loss. This was a real wake up call for a lot of us.

Church seemed a strange place, as if none of us should have been there, yet we were glad that there was something to help us express our loss and mark his passing.

Things were to get even worse. When I arrived home from the funeral, I bumped into my cousin Anita in the shop.

'Have to you about Granddad?' she asked.

'No, what's happened?'

'Granddad has had a stroke and has been rushed into hospital.'

I couldn't believe it!

As soon as I got myself sorted with a toot and arranged a lift, I went in to see him. To my relief, he seemed to be ok and I hoped that he would come home soon. Granddad couldn't die!

Returning from visiting him, a day or two later, I had a strong urge to go and see Haydn Roach. Haydn was a friend of Bert's, a good Christian man and I knew him from Sunday school. I did not know where the feeling came from and I wondered what on earth I would say when I arrived but, somehow, it felt right to follow this strange urging.

When Haydn opened the door, he could see that I was jumpy and very uncomfortable. I must have looked a mess. But he did not hesitate to invite me in. The only thing I could think of to say was 'Is Bert here?' I figured if I asked that then he would see that there was something wrong.

'No, he's not here, but come in anyway,' he said kindly.

I told him what had happened to Gareth and my grandfather and asked if he would pray for me. I really needed someone to talk to and I trusted Haydn. After he prayed for me, he encouraged me to go to church and gave me a modern Bible called The Message. I did not read it but just owning it was comforting, as if it had a strength of its own.

I had been doing up my attic, so that I could go somewhere out of the way of other people. Most of the time, I didn't want to see anyone, anyway. Up there, I made a kind of shrine to honour my friend Gareth. I put three things there, a cross made out of wood, the leaflet I had from Gareth's funeral and the Bible Haydn had given me.

Next evening, my father came to tell me that there was no need to go to the hospital to visit Granddad. He was home. I wondered if Haydn's prayer had helped in that. If so I was very grateful.

My house was under police surveillance and was sometimes raided. One day they came to the house. They may have been looking for someone who was on the run from the police and who was staying with me. As it happened, she was out. The police found the Bible in the attic and saw Haydn's address inside it. There had been a number of house burglaries in the area at that time, and so thinking that I had stolen it, they contacted him and his wife Ruth, who assured them that they had given it to me!

Coping with the grief of losing Gareth really hurt, like my heart was aching or something. I would punch my pillow and scream in frustration. We had had our laughs but I could not deny that we were not truly happy and that a drug lifestyle was not to be taken lightly – serious and even tragic things could happen. But since I didn't know any different and had no idea how to break free, I carried on looking for strength and comfort from what I knew - drugs.

It was about 3 am. I had been up for a few nights. My mind full of heartbroken thoughts about Gareth, I decided to drive down to the cemetery where his grave was. It was dark and quiet as I stood at his graveside.

'Gareth, Gareth.' The agonised words forced themselves past my lips again. 'Why did you do it? Why?'

Then suddenly a chill ran down my spine. Someone or something evil and frightening seemed to have come near me. The stab of fear diverted my attention from Gareth and I glanced nervously over my shoulder, expecting to see someone standing there. Afraid, I headed towards the gates. As I approached them, I noticed a big tree blowing in the wind and felt impelled to look up into it. Then I heard a voice speaking, quite distinctly, in my mind. The invisible speaker seemed to be talking on behalf of others also invisibly present.

'Don't go. Stay here with us,' it said.

A shudder ran through me. Still shaking with fear, I took to my heels and ran to my car, spinning off as fast as I could.

From that point on strange and frightening things started to happen in my house. If I had thought before that something was not quite right there, now I was certain. I saw strange things out of the corner of my eye and, often felt that some presence was watching me. At times, I heard audible voices screaming at me, telling me that I was stupid and would never be free. The voices frequently accused and condemned me, reminding me that I was a failure. It was mental torment and the only way to escape was to take more drugs. Even then, the relief was only temporary and the voices always came back.

Life seemed a total drag unless I had plenty of drugs to do. I was utterly fed up with life. I was even fed up with doing normal things like tying my shoelaces. It seemed as if, though I had squeezed everything I could out of life, I was destined only to exist and never really experience anything special or good. I was just going round and round on the merry-go-round of boring, meaningless existence.

## Chapter 12

### Despair

As if in the nick of time to provide a fresh season in my life, my good friend Stephen was released from prison after serving three years of a six year sentence. While in prison, he had met more boys from what we called 'over the bridge' (England), and a relationship began that opened the way for more drug running. It looked promising, opening up much more business than we'd ever known before.

The contact was taken up and work started. Mark and Stephen were the main dealers and I was the runner. My job was to meet people at certain pick-up points to receive packages, then to move the drugs on, perhaps to bury them or to meet the boys at a house to weigh and bag them for sale. I tested the drugs for strength, and depending on that, we decided how much glucose we would mix with it. Obviously, the more you could mix in, the more money you could make. Sometimes it was obvious that it was strong stuff because, after a toot, I would have to hang on to something or get on my knees because the gear was blowing my head off. I embraced all this fully.

At around ten in the morning, the boys would pick me up.

'Up and at 'um!' Stephen said every day before we did our round for that day, dropping off gear and collecting money. We drove that car for miles. There was always extra business, too, and we never really knew what a day would bring. Phones rang and deals were made. It was exciting! We had a great laugh, thriving on the risk, both among ourselves and with the people we met. The adrenaline was pumping because we knew that, if things didn't go well and we were pulled by the police and turned over, we could all be locked up before the end of the day. Probably, I would have been in the biggest trouble, because I was always the one

carrying the gear. I would have taken the blame, too, rather than see the others in trouble. That was a part of it all.

Before long, I had my own round and people worked for me, so I had more drugs at hand for my own use. From day one, I did a lot more drugs than the others. Maybe I didn't want to come down and face life realistically. At night, when the boys were at home in bed, I was in my house doing as many drugs as I could, taking it to the limit. I wanted to be as high as I possibly could because then, to my mind, nothing could touch me.

It was a false belief, of course. Drugs could not give me security. Instead, they opened the door to destruction. For years, I had been tormented by voices in my head, shouting accusations at me. These voices got louder and louder, as if they were telling me that they would never let me go. The only time they gave me any peace was when I was actually doing drugs. As soon as I began to come down, they were on my case. Often, I heard someone laughing at me or rattling chains. That evil presence in my house was still there and other people felt it, too. Out of the corner of my eye, I still saw those figures in the shadows. It was getting scary!

I was in an intense mental battle, too, as things that I had buried and refused to face now came to the surface. Doing as many drugs as I could gave me some escape but I could not avoid the feelings of extreme frustration that overwhelmed me, feelings that are hard to put into words. It was like the feeling someone might get when they are being tied me up with a rope.

In this raging battle, I went on a spree of crime and more drugs. It didn't help because I was spending quite a bit of time in police cells and being in there, high on drugs, is no fun at all. 'Neil, you're here more than we are,' a policeman told me, more than once. However they could never nail down any worthwhile charges. I had often wondered if they were just waiting to get me for something bigger and put me away for a while.

The pace at which I was running continued to affect me both mentally and physically. I was psychotic at times and my speech was badly affected, so that I could no longer talk properly because my words were slurred. Obviously, people noticed and began asking me if I was ok. I was agitated and very, very restless, finding it difficult to sleep at all. A friend even rocked me to sleep sometimes. I was in torment.

One day, when Mark and I were out delivering, I had a very weird experience.

‘Mate, I feel really strange,’ I told him. ‘I feel like I want to climb out of my skin and start a new life.’

It didn’t make sense to me then. Now, it makes perfect sense.

I lived in my house for two years without ever paying one penny of my mortgage. Threats and warnings kept coming but I just didn’t respond to them. Finally, I was given a date when the bailiffs were going to throw me out and change the locks. My plan was to barricade myself in.

The night before the bailiffs were due to come, I spent the night in a friend’s house.

‘I’ll go back first thing in the morning,’ I told myself.

Early next morning, to get home quicker, someone gave me a lift. He was driving a car that he had stolen during the night but, since he had changed the plates, I figured it would be all right. However, we were tailed by the CID. After a car chase, we spun into a field and ran. I found some bushes to hide in and stayed there for a while, still hoping to get home in time for these people who were coming to throw me out. I was ready for a fight. When all seemed quiet, I started the walk home but I didn’t get far before I was picked up by a police van. They had to let me go, later, because my finger prints were not on the car, but by the time I got home, my house had been repossessed and all the locks had been changed.

As I stood and wondered what to do, a friend opened the window for me. He had been staying with me and had hidden from the bailiffs, so that they left without knowing he was in

the house. I climbed in. For the rest of my time at that house, I had to get in and out through the window. I knew that the people who changed the locks would be back, so I made sure I was there in the mornings to face them.

I continued to run drugs for the other boys, as well doing my own rounds. That kept me busy, but the battle still raged within me and my frustration grew more and more intense. I was sick of everything. I had tried all the pleasures that I thought would bring me satisfaction, but they just left me feeling dead inside. The more I tried to satisfy myself and find comfort, the worse it got.

It was around that time that that Stephen came into the house and threatened to knife me for losing the drugs. I was forced to reveal my fear and weakness to him. Everything was falling apart, including me.

The few weeks after that incident were a nightmare. Sitting in the car one day with Mark I felt confused and really scared. In my mind I asked for someone to please help me and get me out of this life. It was out of control.

Nothing was secure anymore. There were more broken relationships and fights with friends. I longed more than ever to be free but did not know how it could happen. I cried out in my heart, though I was not sure who was there to answer me.

Not long after this, I was arrested for driving a stolen car. They couldn't pin that one on me either, but I was told that I would be charged with handling stolen goods. I sat in the interview room while one of the arresting police officers asked me questions. I will never forget his eyes. They seemed so kind, like he actually cared more for me than for arresting me. There was a kind of glow about him. I couldn't figure out what it was.

My court case would take place a couple of months afterwards. Until then, I was placed under a curfew and had to be in the house from seven p.m. until seven a.m. Pressure was coming from every side.



Alone in the house one night, I thought about my future. At last, I faced the truth.

‘You have got to do something, Neil, or you are going to die in this world of drugs and torment.’

That night I slept, wondering, wondering, wondering what to do.

When I woke next morning, I felt almost indescribably hopeful and positive. The sun was shining and for some reason it seemed to represent a new start.

‘I am going to get out of here today,’ I told myself.

That morning I put a few things in a bag and walked out of that house without even looking back. I was desperate to be rescued from this God-forsaken life. It was a nightmare and I knew I was running out of time. It was a dark place to be in, yet something deep within me told me that everything would be all right. Whatever that feeling was, it helped me to take the next step into the unknown. As I walked down the garden path for the last time, I felt excited. I didn’t have much of a plan but I knew I was doing the right thing.

I thought about the bailiffs I had wanted to fight, and the thieves that I had allowed to use my house to store stolen goods.

‘You can have it. I’m out of here,’ I said.

I decided to hand myself in to the police and deal with the warrants against me. After being given a date for my court appearance, I went back to the place I had so often run to for safety – Mam and Granddad’s. There, I went through the pain of withdrawal as I came off drugs and just thought things over. It was strangely peaceful.

## Chapter 13

### Prison

After my court appearance, I was sent down, on remand, until sentencing could take place. As I sat in the van on my way to prison, I had a strange feeling that something was about to happen to me, something that could take my life in a totally different direction. It was a good feeling but it was shadowed by fear. This time in prison could strengthen the evil in me and introduce me to another level of crime and addiction. As I looked out of the window at people walking or driving their cars, I wondered what their lives were like and whether they were good or bad. I had often wished to have a good life, often wished that I was someone else.

My first night banged up in prison was fine.

‘I could easily get used to this,’ I thought, feeling a whole weight of responsibility lift off me. ‘Prison is ok. Right up my street, in some ways.’

Although I was on the remand wing, locked up for 23 hours a day, I was content. I felt secure and it was a relief to take it easy and have someone looking after me. I had never really been able to look after myself. In some ways, prison was like the army and I rose to the challenge of learning the rules and coping with the discipline. Not surprisingly, I knew a lot of the boys there and as soon as I walked onto the landing I saw familiar faces who greeted me with a smile and a welcome.

I started training again, in the gym when I could and also in my cell, doing press ups and anything else I could do without weights or machines. I made new friends and looked forward to association time, when our cell doors would be open for an hour and I could go and visit the lads. One of them was nicknames Chopper because he had attacked someone with a hatchet for stealing from him. Apparently, he had gone straight to the hospital and

pleaded insanity, but it didn't wash! He shared a cell with Candy, a boy I knew quite well. We had some good laughs. Blucky, also on the same landing as me, was someone else I knew well because we had done a few deals together. He was looking at 5 years for being caught with a load of drugs. There were a few from the same drugs ring on that landing, so getting to know people didn't take long!

One day, I bumped into an old friend. We called him Trigger because he reminded us of Trigger from the TV programme 'Only Fools and Horses.' He had been inside for a few years already, for slashing two boys with a blade. We greeted each other warmly. He hadn't changed. Still off his head. I could hear him shouting and laughing and kicking doors as he walked on.

However, alone for long periods in my cell, my thoughts were strange and conflicting. I was still trying to figure out a way to change my life. Questions ran through my mind. Where did it all go wrong? I tried to trace my footsteps as far back as my dark mind was able. I had always been used to blaming other people for the way my life was. Now I was beginning to wonder how many of my problems were simply down to me.

One day, it all came to a head. I was in my cell that morning, thinking intensely. I had refused to go out for exercise, feeling that there were questions I had to answer before I could move on. I was now desperate to find a way out of the lifestyle I had chosen but I was spiralling downwards, utterly frustrated and without any answers at all. I seemed lost in the maze of my own mind. Everywhere I looked there was a closed door, just blackness. I felt completely hopeless. The more I looked and faced the truth, the more I realised that all my plans and bright ideas were not going to give me the answers I needed.

Then, out of nowhere, I heard a voice. It was not audible, yet it was clear and very strong. I knew with certainty that it was not coming from me.

"Don't you remember who you are?" asked the Voice.

Then, as if I were watching a movie of my life, pictures came flooding into my mind. I saw my childhood, remembering the happy times, like the feeling I had on Friday afternoons when I knew I could stay with my grandparents for a whole weekend. I saw, too, the dreams I had for my life then. I saw my mother and realised how I had hurt her. I saw the other people that I had hurt, family members, friends and even strangers. It was as though something was being poured over my head which entered my body and reached every part. With every face and memory I saw, waves of shame and guilt came over me. This powerful experience seemed to be driving me to my knees as I saw myself for what I was and what I had become. I saw all the rejection, the bitterness, the person that I had turned into. For the first time for as long as I could remember, I realised that I was wrong. My stubbornness was a disgrace! I had been stubborn for all those years, hanging onto feelings of anger, self-pity and resentment because I believed I had a right to them, as if the world owed me something.

I had fought for the right to express my rage and to be understood for so long, and done so much damage along the way - and now I realised that I was just plain wrong. That is embarrassing! I felt absolutely exposed. I came from a small community and everybody there knew what I had become. Filled with agonising regret for the things I had done, I wondered whether I could take any more.

Then with that the Voice spoke to me again.

‘If you want a second chance I can give you another chance.’

Suddenly, I began to see how things could be different. Hope started to well up in me. Light started to shine. Doors started to open. I remembered Hayden and Ruth. I saw their smiling faces and remembered their warm welcome when I visited their home. Excitement began to increase as more questions came.

'Can it be possible? Can I change? Could I have a second chance? Can all this bad stuff in my life be wiped away? Is it possible that I could get another go at life, start again? I have made such a mess of this one.'

The Voice seemed so full of love and yet at the same time, full of authority. I knew that whoever was speaking to me wanted to give me a second chance at life, a new start, and was able to do it. When this Voice spoke, every other voice clamouring in my mind became quiet.

I wanted freedom so badly that I could taste it.

'Who are you? Who is speaking to me?' I asked.

The answer was mind-blowing.

'Jesus,' replied the Voice.

I was flooded with joy and hope as I saw a way opening up in front of me.

'I have to take this,' I thought. In my heart, I seemed to reach out with both hands to accept what was offered. I did not fully understand it, but I took it, promising myself that when I got out of prison I would go and see Haydn and Ruth.

Blucky's cell mate, who was facing a seven year sentence for dealing cocaine, told me that he was reading the Bible and had a cross in his cell. He said that he had found God. I did not respond. Somehow, I did not yet fully belong to that world. Whatever was going on in me was not yet complete.

I felt excited about the future now, and wanted to tell some of my family what had happened, though I could not really find the words. I wrote to Mam and Granddad, telling them that I wanted to change my life and that when I came out I planned to go to church. My grandmother used to call me 'Little Boy Lost.' I wrote in my letter, 'Do you remember that little boy lost? Well he ain't lost any more.'

I was coming home - to God, and to my family, excited that they would get back the Neil they loved and had once known.

I was still on the remand wing, as I had not been sentenced. It was not clear what sort of sentence I was looking at. I had been found guilty only of driving offences, but they could mean up to 18 months in jail. There was also the stolen car case; that could be brought forward and dealt with at the same time.

The day finally came for me to go back to court for sentencing. At the court, I was put in a cell with a boy called Frankie, who came from Penrhys. He was kicking off, big time.

‘They are going to send me to Bristol,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to go there.’

He made such a fuss that I had to be moved to another cell so that police officers could go in to get him and put him in the van. It took seven of them. I found out a few days later that Frankie hung himself in that prison.

When it was my turn to be sentenced, I felt indescribable peace. Whatever happened in court, I knew, would not change my recent experience. Almost like God was my judge. Unbelievably, I was sentenced to only 42 days in prison, which meant that I should serve 21. Although I didn’t have a long sentence, I felt as though I had been in for a long time, perhaps because so much had happened. On the remand wing, I had been locked up for 23 hours a day, too. When my sentence came to an end and I walked out of the prison, I looked forward to exploring my new life.

## Chapter 14

### My New Life

I was still trying to figure out what had actually happened to me that day in my cell. As I had promised myself, I went to see Haydn and Ruth and it was great to see the look on their faces when I told them that I wanted to go to church. For the moment, that was pretty much all I could say.

Haydn and Ruth told me that their son, Daniel, would call and arrange to pick me up. When I went to the church as a kid, we often went to Haydn and Ruth's house after the meeting and I'd had lots of play fights with Daniel, so we knew each other. He did call me and arranged to pick me up. Feeling excited and nervous, I stood in the rain at our agreed meeting place. I waited for a long time but Daniel didn't show up. Confused, I asked, 'What are you up to God? Did you bring me this far just to tease me?' Disappointed and hurt, the idea came, 'I thought it was too good to be true.'

Daniel rang me, apologising. He had simply forgotten to pick me up. We arranged to meet on the next Sunday. When I jumped into his car, it was like being in a time warp as we greeted each other! Just seeing his face brought back happy memories. Daniel looked me up and down.

'I don't think I could fight you now!' he said.

That first night in church, I felt like a duck out of water.

'All these holy people! How am I going to fit in with this lot?'

I felt embarrassed and ashamed because some of them they knew about my past. I looked rough because all I had to wear were the clothes I stood up in. I had even stolen my jeans from prison. I tried to hide in a corner, but of course, some people recognised me. Although I

did not know it, the person who led the meeting that night was a high-ranking policeman. He had seen my mug shot during the week and when he saw me in church, he thought, ‘What is that man doing here?’

He thought I might have been checking the place out so I could come back to burgle it!

After the meeting, people came to talk to me and I was moved by the love that they showed me. As I left the church, the pastor shook my hand and asked my name. The next week, he remembered it and told me how good it was to see me again. I felt special because he been thinking about me and remembered me. I discovered that his name was Roy. He became a wonderful spiritual father to me.

Daniel took me to church every week and I began to feel comfortable there. Daniel himself had only just started going back to church after being away for many years and so that helped me to settle in a bit. In other ways, though, I was still battling. Often, I heard a voice in my mind telling me to return to my old life.

*‘If you come back, I’ll give you all you want,’* the voice promised. I was clued up enough by now to know that this voice was demonic.

‘Why don’t you have the church *and* drugs’, the voice would say. ‘No-one will know.’ But I didn’t want that.

At other times, the voice would scream at me,

*‘COME BACK! I will NEVER let you go.’*

Even when Daniel and I were travelling to church, that voice spoke to me, urging me to grab the steering wheel and pull the car off the motorway. Strange as it sounds, the pressure of that voice was very compelling and I had to sit on my hands just in case I did anything stupid.

It was great being church. I felt like God was speaking to me all the time. Whoever was preaching seemed to say things that were personal to me.

‘How do they know that about me?’ I wondered. ‘Has someone told them what to say?’



The worship songs were brilliant and I would cry sometimes as we sang songs of Jesus' love and how God makes things new.

I saw some of the police officers there who had arrested me in the past. That was really weird. They seemed like normal people! One of them was the officer who had arrested me for driving the stolen car. I had known then that there was something different about him. Now it made sense! We had a good laugh when we met, though I think he was really amazed to hear that I had found God.

When I was in prison, I had come across the book called, 'The Happiest People on Earth'. It was written by Demos Shakarian, who had started an organisation called 'The Businessman's Fellowship'. The happiest people on earth, according to this guy, were Christians. I was starting to believe him.

One night, when Pastor Roy was preaching at the church, I began to feel really strange. I realised that I was being challenged to take the next step in giving my life to Jesus and my heart started to pound as I listened to him and I squirmed in my seat.

Roy explained that sin had separated us from God and that we need Jesus to bring us back to God through what he has done for us on the cross. He said that when we don't have God in our lives then we feel empty. I only knew that too well. He also said that we deserved to be separated from God for eternity, in hell. But because God loves us, He gave His own son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place and take our punishment. Now, we could be forgiven and go free. God would not force us to receive Jesus and give our lives to Him, but if we did, it would mean that we could be forgiven and go to Heaven. Not only that, but all God's blessings would flow into our lives and we would learn what we were created for. This was something we owed both God and ourselves, but it would mean complete surrender to Jesus Christ and His will for us, forever.

As I listened, something massive seemed about to happen. I felt like there was an invisible rubber band holding me to the seat. If Roy spoke the word, it would snap and shoot me to the front. Pastor Roy ended his sermon by asking whether anyone was ready to give their life to Jesus. Eagerly, I sprang to my feet and hurried to the front of the church, as if the window of opportunity would be open for only a short while, and I didn't want to miss it.

He prayed aloud, then looked straight at me and said,

'God is going to use you.'

I was amazed.

People came to shake my hand and congratulate me. Somebody even gave me a Bible. It was one of the best evenings in my whole life. Although I had some sort of relationship with God already, everything clicked into place that evening. It was though the work of making me a Christian was finished, deep inside me. I went home that evening feeling that there were now two of us. A Presence came into my life that has never left me. I knew with all my heart that Jesus had come to my side and that He was the greatest Friend anyone could ever find.

## Chapter 15

### The truth will set you free

‘Go to Poacher and Davies and ask for your old job back.’ The voice of God spoke softly in my heart.

‘But I have made so many mistakes there,’ I protested. ‘Why on earth would they take me back?’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ He said in my heart. ‘I’ll sort it out.’

So, next day, I made my way to the works to see them. On my way, I met my mother. We hadn’t seen each other for a little while, but she had heard what had happened to me. She saw me in the street as she was driving her car and pulled over to talk to me.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘I am on my way to get my old job back,’ I told her. ‘Jesus told me to go.’

‘So it’s true, then. What happened?’ Mum looked very happy for me.

‘I found Jesus - or rather, Jesus found me!’ I replied.

As I continued on my journey to my old employers’ premises, I felt a very strong Presence walking at my side, as if Jesus himself was there with me. And – guess what! – I got my job back.

For a while, I found it difficult to sleep, because God spoke to me constantly, telling me how much he loved me and assuring me that things were going to work out. It was like a Father speaking to His son. It seemed that God was more excited than I was about what had happened to me. Sometimes I asked him to let me go to sleep, because I had work in the morning. As I closed my eyes, I would say,

‘But I love you so much Lord.’ It was like coming home.

I couldn't get Jesus out of my mind, thinking about Him constantly. I had such a deep hunger for the Bible that I wanted to read it all the time. More and more, I realised how much I had changed. My language had once been foul but now I stopped swearing without even trying. I saw everything differently. When I looked up into sky, I knew with certainty that God had made it all. His signature was all over it and I couldn't understand how I could have missed that in the past. My eyes had been opened to a whole new world.

One night, I had a dream of a rainbow; within it was the outline of a face, smiling at me. Soon afterwards, I came across a story in the Bible about God setting a rainbow over the world and promising not to judge the world again by flooding it. I realised for the first time that I had been under God's judgement, but now I was His son and free from all judgement.

I learnt that some people had been praying for me for a long time. Haydn and Ruth, together with Bert Cooper and their whole church, had prayed for me when I was in prison. A woman who taught me in Sunday school had prayed for me all my life. Later, I called her to say thank you. I had never realised that people could be so committed to each other and I was grateful.

My mother was a Christian, although for years she had stopped going to church. She told me that when I was a baby, a Pastor called Owen Dando had prayed for me. When he and I talked about it later, he commented,

'Yes, and I did a good job of it, eh?'

Mum said that, one night when I was in hospital after an overdose, she went to the church looking for help. There, she asked David Dando, Pastor Owen Dando's son, to pray for me.

'How can I be happy in heaven, knowing that my son is in hell?' she had asked him in anguish. It was great to see my mother and her two sisters come back to church and rededicate their lives to Jesus. I was astonished that God had used me to do that.

I was the talk of the town.

‘Have you heard what’s happened to Neil Harvey?’ people asked. ‘He’s gone religious, or found God or something.’

‘The police are scratching their heads over you up at the station,’ someone else told me.

People would stop me on the streets and ask if it was true. That gave me an opportunity to tell them about Jesus. I loved doing that.

As I was coming out of a shop one day, someone said,

‘I hear you have gone religious.’

I nodded. ‘That’s right.’

‘You wanna be careful mate, there’s no coming back from that stuff!’

‘I don’t wanna come back,’ I told him firmly.

Before long, I was back in court for the stolen car case. I prayed that I wouldn’t go back to prison and I didn’t. Instead, I was sentenced to a hundred hours of community service. Unbelievably, my team supervisor was a Christian and he looked after me well.

Daniel and I joined an Alpha course at Brackla Tabernacle. I really wanted to do something to serve God and one night, before I went to Alpha, I got on my knees in my bedroom and prayed.

‘Lord, would you speak to me tonight through Phil?’

Phil was the leader of the course and I trusted him. I forgot all about the prayer, but, in the break that evening, we chatted.

‘Are you working?’ Phil asked.

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘I work in a car repair centre. I’m planning to stay in the job until...’

Phil finished the sentence for me.

‘Until God calls you into full time ministry.’

As soon as he said those words I remembered my prayer.

‘Full time ministry!’ I thought. ‘Wow!’ Then I prayed under my breath, whatever you want me to do for you Lord, I will do it.’

I really looked forward to my baptism, a great evening where I could publicly show my faith in Jesus and tell some of my story. As if in opposition, those evil voices came back, worse than ever. Alone in my room, I heard the devil speaking to me, as well as God, and sometimes the devil’s voice seemed louder. It was real torment, keeping on and on in accusation and condemnation. He told me that God was condemning me and that I was not really free and then accused me for having such terrible thoughts. Sometimes his voice was actually audible and I could hear it with my physical ears.

People noticed how troubled I was and asked me if I was all right, but I was afraid to talk to anybody about it in case they thought I was crazy. It was a terrible secret to have. Desperately, I begged God for help. One day, a girl came to see me at work.

‘I think God has told me to give you this,’ she said as she handed me a book. It was called ‘The Bondage Breaker’, written by a preacher named Neil Anderson, and was about how to be set free from bondage to the devil. As soon as I started to read it, I felt released. Soon, it was obvious to me that I was not the only Christian struggling with such thoughts. As I continued to read, feeling as though shackles were falling from me, I realised that I had accepted a lie when I believed Satan’s accusations. A battle was going on for my mind, but God was giving me the keys to freedom. One day, as I knelt and cried to God because of the torment, He spoke to me clearly in my heart.

‘You are free! You are free! You are free! Rise up in your freedom!’

I asked him, ‘How do I do it?’

He replied, ‘By faith. You must believe that you are free.’

What a powerful lesson! It turned out to be the key to the whole Christian life. I had to walk by faith, trusting that what God says in the Bible is true and rejecting every contrary voice. Then I would know the power of God to make me truly free.

I began to spend a lot of time meditating on verses from the Bible that told me that I was accepted, that God was with me and that there is no condemnation for those who are 'in Christ'. There were still accusations and I had to apply the truth by faith as I began to learn how to take every thought captive to Christ. 'You will know the truth and the truth will set you free' became my favourite Bible verse.

'Why don't you go to Bible College?'

I sensed that God was speaking through my thoughts, telling me that the time had come. It was a few months since the conversation at the Alpha course. I was still in a major spiritual battle sometimes and it seemed like a good idea to go to a place where I could learn more about the Bible and faith.

Pastor Roy telephoned Bryn Thomas, the Principal at Penygroes, then the Bible College of the Apostolic denomination. The ball was rolling! Soon I would spend a year there, being trained to serve God with my life. I applied for a government grant and was allowed £1500. That was not enough to cover my expenses but God had it all in hand. My mother's mother, a Christian, sold her house and moved to a smaller one. She had some money left over and prayed about what to do with it and God told her to use it to help me go to Bible College. So my Nan paid all the expenses not covered by my grant. I was beginning to learn that when God calls someone, He provides for their needs.

I began to visit my mother and stepfather, trying to rebuild our relationship. As I grew to understand them better, I realised that many of the troubles we had at home when I was younger had a lot to do with me, my problems and my stubbornness. I knew that I had to take responsibility for my own actions and not blame them for everything.

'I still have your Children's Bible here somewhere,' Mum said one day. 'I think it is upstairs in the attic.'

I looked in the boxes stored in the attic and found a Bible that seemed familiar. Opening it, I saw written in the front page, 'This Bible belongs to Neil Harvey.' Then I saw that I had written inside it the words 'God is love' and 'Jesus wept.' Memories came back of a time when I had a relationship with Jesus and liked talking with Him. I remembered how I had gradually forgotten about Him as things became more difficult in my young life.

'Lord, You are so wonderful!' I told God. 'In all those years when I had forgotten about You, You never forgot about me.'

One night, David Dando, the policeman who had led my very first service at Brackla Tabernacle, apologised to me publicly. He admitted that he had judged me and said he knew now that God really had changed my life. I was thrilled that the change in me was evident to other people.

One evening, my cousin Sarah rang me from the pub that my family used for years.

'I've got somebody with me who wants to say hi to you,' she said.

A familiar voice came on the line.

'Hi, Neil, it's Simon Evans!' I did not need to hear him say it. His voice was unforgettable from the years when we had been boyhood pals. It was great to hear his voice.

'Fancy coming down for a pint?' he asked.

From then on, we were big mates again. He liked to drink and then he'd be at the heart of whatever was going on at the pub. If he thought I was weird to give up getting drunk and go to church, he did not say so. For the next two years I tried to persuade him to give his life to Jesus.

'Simon, it's for real, mate,' I told him.



Later, he admitted that there were a few times when he felt like hitting me. But I kept on at him and, one day, he gave in.

‘I want to ask Jesus into my life,’ he told me, and prayed a beautiful, simple prayer of faith.

‘God has been speaking to me through you and I figure that I needed to do this,’ he told me.

‘The funny thing is that after all that effort of trying to get you to become a Christian,’ I told him later, ‘when you did, you really got on my nerves. You would be in my house until three or four in the morning, asking questions and going on and on about how you had found new things in the Bible! I think you were getting your own back!’

One night, Simon and I saw a group of boys buying and selling drugs. I knew them.

‘Alright,’ I greeted them.

‘How's it going, Neil?’

“Fine thanks,” I said.

And that was it. I walked past. Once I would have been one of them but now my only thought was gratitude that I was out of that lifestyle.

However, I was still living in the place that I had always lived, among the same old friends. Temptation was never far away and one day, I gave in and took some drugs. That night, I went out with someone who wanted to steal some stuff, though I didn't want to do anything myself. I hid behind a wall, crouching with my back against it as they were taking stuff from a skip at the back of a factory.

‘How on earth did this happen?’ I thought, feeling so sorry and regretful that and I had let God down. ‘I'm so sorry, Lord. Please don't leave me.’

I heard that small inner voice again. ‘Don't worry, Neil. I'm right here.’

‘Thank you Lord,’ I whispered gratefully.

As the time to go to Bible College drew near, I was really excited. I knew it was just what I needed. Then, a week before I was due to leave, a warrants officer came to the house.

Apparently I still had fines to pay, about £600 in all. I thought they had been cancelled when I had my prison sentence, but I was wrong. My past was catching up with me again, it seemed. However, I'd had a tax rebate and a gift and together they covered the fine. I heard God whisper in my heart,  
'Don't worry, I have everything under control.'

## Chapter 16

### Bible college part 1 - Pen-Y-Groes

I opened the door of my new room and looked in.

‘Wow! This is like a hotel,’ I thought.

Whoever had prepared my room had left the window open a little to let in some fresh air. I put down my bags, feeling at home immediately, and as I did I heard the birds singing in the treetops. I realised that it had been years since I had really taken in the simple things in life, things as normal as birdsong. Even though I had those great experiences with God, my life had been going so fast for so long that my mind was always full. Now, as I listened to the birds and absorbed the peace, I thought,

‘Yes, I am in the right place.’

I gazed out of the window at the trees and rolling hills. You could see for miles. The college was in West Wales, in a quiet and beautiful setting. As I looked, I thought about the welcome I had received from the Principal, Bryn Thomas, when I went to his office to introduce myself.

‘He’s a really nice guy,’ I decided. ‘I felt comfortable with him straight away. This is a good place to be!’

Soon, our lectures started. I was like a sponge, taking in as much of the teaching as I possibly could. I was in awe of the things that I was learning from the Bible about God and who He is and what He is like. It was amazing! Every lesson opened my eyes to new things. I learnt that God is wonderful, awesome and very loving. My understanding was growing fast and I loved it.

The course was not so intense as to take all our time in the classroom and I spent hours walking in the lovely countryside and talking with God. I really felt I was getting to know him better.

Hungry to share my story with others and tell them what God had done in my life, I spoke to Bryn about it. He put me in touch with an organisation called Teen Challenge. It was started in the 1950s, when David Wilkerson, a young pastor, heard God tell him to go to New York and reach out to the gangs and drug addicts. Many became Christians, and one of them, Nicky Cruz, became a famous evangelist himself. David started a rehabilitation centre for addicts who wanted to learn a better way of living and soon there were many more such places. Now, there are rehabilitation centres for ex-addicts all around the world – including Pen-Y-Groes, near the college

Every Friday night, those who had moved on from rehab into an evangelism centre drove a special bus to Swansea city centre. Teams of ex-addicts went onto the streets to try to reach other people with the Christian message. From day one, I loved being involved with it. It was great to talk to people about Jesus and to hear the other guys' stories. Meeting Christians who had similar backgrounds to mine was very helpful, too.

One night, as I walked along a back street with another team member, I heard God say 'Wait here.' We stood there for a few minutes, though nothing seemed to be happening. Then a scruffy guy came around the corner with his head down.

'This is it,' I said. 'We should speak to him.'

We approached him and I gave him a leaflet about God, sometimes called a tract.

'What's that?' he asked.

'It's a little message from God,' I said.

Then we told him a bit about who we were and why we were there. He wept and told us that, about ten years earlier, when he had been on his way from Scotland to the Bible College in

Pen-Y-Groes, he had been sidetracked and joined up with the wrong sort of people. Now he was a homeless addict. We could hardly believe that God had arranged things so well! I was at the Bible College and my team partner was Scottish. It blew his mind when we said that God had told us to wait on the corner to speak to him.

We took him back to the bus for a cup of hot soup and assured him that God still loved him and wanted him to know it. He cried and cried as we talked about the rehabilitation centre and how God could help him and he promised come back next week. We looked forward to seeing him - but he didn't show. I was very sad about that and often wondered what happened to him. Then, one weekend when I was home, I was watching TV when the Lord told me, 'Change the channel!'

I obeyed and to my amazement, I saw the same guy on TV! It was programme about Christian workers in Swansea prison. They were having a Bible study with some prisoners - and he was there! I watched as they all huddled together to pray, this man a part of it praying with them. I felt God telling me,

'I still have my hand on him, don't worry.'

I felt greatly encouraged that I had been part of God's plan for him.

College students were sent out to different churches to preach and tell their story. The first time I preached, I spoke about a man in the Bible who was born blind and how one day he had met Jesus, Who healed his eyes. People asked him how he could see now and why they should believe his story. They hated Jesus and thought He was a real trouble maker. The man replied, "I don't know the answers, but I know one thing. I was blind and now I can see." I felt exactly the same. I was spiritually blind but now I could see.

As I came to the end of my message, I recognised a man standing at the back of the church, looking scruffy, unshaven and a bit confused. We had shared a prison cell for a couple of

days. He was a tramp, in for being drunk and disorderly. I jumped down from the platform and ran to speak to him.

‘Hey, Malcolm!’ I said.

‘Hello,’ he replied, obviously confused about whether it was really me, the one he had shared a cell with in prison.

‘Do you remember me?’ I asked.

‘It’s Neil!’ He seemed more comfortable, as if he’d met a friend.

‘What are you doing here?’

Malcolm shrugged.

‘I don’t really know. I just felt an urge to come.’

‘God led you here,’ I told him.

Then I told him a bit about how I had found God and he had totally changed my life.

‘God loves you, too, Malcolm, and wants to help you the way He helped me,’ I concluded.

Malcolm listened, taking me seriously, and I asked him if I could pray for him.

‘Yes, I need that’, he said. We both bowed our heads and prayed.

Later, Bryn asked me why I had jumped down from the platform so suddenly. He didn’t seem happy about it until I told him the reason. Then, he smiled!

It was great to build a healthy relationship with my family and someone was always ready to pick me up for a visit home. My mother told me that Granddad said,

‘I can sleep in peace now, knowing that Neil is ok’.

Whenever I went home I was certain to visit Mark. If I could not get hold of him, he always called me later in the week. He was still up to his old ways and, by now, he had built a small empire, with a lot of people working for him in the drug trade, supplying much of South Wales. I always told him about Jesus and he listened to me respectfully, but never went any further. The police were on his back all the time and I sometimes visited him in houses that

were barricaded. A lot of crazy stuff was going on and he seemed to be in the middle of it. Once, I discovered that he had been pulled in for questioning over a murder. He'd had nothing to do with it and, later, two other boys were charged.

'Man, you need to be careful!' I told him.

I knew Granddad was a sick man and probably didn't have long to live. On my weekend visits home, I tried to do as much as possible for him and Mam. I knew I could never repay what they had done for me but I wanted to show them that I loved them.

Granddad grew slowly worse. One weekend I went home to find that he had to stay in bed the whole time. On Sunday evening, before going back to college, I went upstairs to give him his medicine.

'I love you, Granddad,' I told him.

I had never said that to him before. It was just not the way my family communicated. To us, actions spoke louder than words and my family always stuck together closely through hard times. Those were the last words I ever said to him because, three days later, he died.

Not long before his death, I had preached about God as a Father, loving, trustworthy and protective. After Granddad died, I wondered whether that message was really for me. I had always wondered how I would cope when Granddad was no longer around, but God strengthened me and showed me that He would be the One taking care of me now.

I wanted to know whether Granddad had made his peace with God before he died. He had never been a religious man, but I did notice that he was very thoughtful in the last months of his life. I had been asking God to speak to him personally, even in his sleep. On the night before his funeral, God woke me up.

'Read Psalm 41,' He said.

When I opened my Bible to the psalm, I could hardly believe what I read.

‘Blessed is the man who considers the poor, the Lord will deliver him in times of trouble. The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive. And he shall be blessed upon the earth. He will not deliver him into the hands of his enemies. The Lord will strengthen him on his sick bed. I said, Lord, be merciful to me, and heal my soul, for I have sinned against you.’

In this way, God showed me how my grandfather had asked for forgiveness on his death bed. I was so happy about that.



## Chapter 17

### Bible college part 2 - Denmark

My plane had landed at the airport in Denmark. I picked up my suitcase and looked around. I did not speak the language and just hoped I'd find the people sent to pick me up. To my relief, I saw a young guy holding up a sign with my name on it. Tommy greeted me in a friendly way and led me to the college bus. The driver introduced himself as Martin Mizo. They seemed great guys.

Hungry for further training, I had applied to the Apostolic Bible College in Denmark when my course at Pen-Y-Groes ended. So here I was, excited to meet Tommy and Martin and start this next adventure.

I wondered what the college could be like, if it was anything like the bus they had sent for me. It was a complete rust-bucket!

'Will this thing even get us to the college?' I wondered silently. Martin must have read my mind,

"Don't worry. This bus runs on faith!"

I smiled politely. 'It would have to!'

Tommy, who was Danish, and Martin, from Slovakia, had similar backgrounds to mine. Tommy had been in a rehabilitation centre and was starting over at the ripe old age of 22. Martin was about 30. He had spent time in a Teen Challenge centre in Slovakia after years of being a hardened criminal, addicted to heroin. One night in Slovakia, he had been asked to tell his story in a meeting, where David Wilkerson, the founder of Teen Challenge was the speaker. Before eight thousand people, Martin was able to testify to the enormous change that Jesus Christ had made in his life.

On the way back to the college we picked up another boy, Marian, another Slovakian, who had been a heroin addict before going into the Teen Challenge programme.

I'm so happy to meet you,' I told them. 'Ever since I became a Christian, I've longed for relationships with Christians who've had the same sort of experiences as me.'

I explained that I'd worked for Teen Challenge in Wales and had loved relating to the Christian guys there. But most of our time was dedicated to reaching out to people on the streets. We only met once a week and couldn't develop the depth of friendship that I needed. Now God was giving me new friends with the same background as mine.

I was amazed when I saw the beauty and size of the college. This impressive place had been built by the Apostolic church, fifty years before. The Apostolic Convention is held there every year, with many caravans parked in the extensive grounds. The building's dimensions were exactly the same as those of Noah's Ark, so there were plenty of jokes about having to go in two by two. It had four floors, with balconies overlooking a large and beautiful lake, a great place to take an early morning stroll and think.

Tommy took me to the entrance hall where there was a reception table, so I could sign in. After that, he took me to my room. I thought it might be a good idea to change my clothes after the long journey. Just as I had stripped to my underpants, there came a knock on my door and, thinking that Tommy had come back, I opened it. To my shock, it was one of the girl students who had come to introduce herself. She looked startled.

'Hi,' I mumbled as I shook her hand. The conversation was very short! 'Good start, Neil!' I said to myself as I closed the door.

As more students arrived, the place was buzzing. I had never experienced anything like this international gathering of dedicated Christians. College lectures could be in Danish, French or English with simultaneous translation available through headphones. In the mornings, the student body was together, being taught the Bible. In the afternoons, there were four

‘schools’ and each student could choose which to attend, providing their teachers thought they could benefit from the classes offered. Apart from Leaders’ School, Counselling School, Worship School and Drama School, there was a Disciple School for very new Christians. It was possible to combine two schools, with two days in each, and at first I combined counselling and leadership classes. After my first diploma in counselling, I concentrated on leadership, realising that I needed all the help I could get.

One of the teachers’ assistants asked me to help her start prayer meetings for the student body. The room in which they were held was on the top floor and was soon nicknamed ‘Close to Heaven.’ There were prayer meetings most evenings and half the student body attended. It was exciting stuff. My good friend Nawaz, from Pakistan, and I held tea parties every evening with fifteen or so people crowded into his room. He often cooked a good curry, too!

Some teachers took me on trips to Romania and gave me responsibility, so I had a chance to develop the gifts that God had given me. It was a wonderful time. I began to stand out, as I had in the army, and got the nickname ‘Chief.’ I loved college life and drank in the teaching we were given. God was giving me a whole new future and my past receded. I found a wonderful mentor in Peter Prothero, who had moved from London to Denmark to be one of the teachers at the college. His Bible knowledge was immense and he was a kind and approachable person. We were friendly from the start, but I knew him better in my second year, when he asked me to be his teacher’s assistant. He hated administration and was hoping that I would be good at it, so he had a shock to find out that I was worse than him.

It was a joy to learn from this wise and godly man. In addition to that God spoke to me personally about many things. I was learning a lot.

On the first Saturday, a group of us including Nawaz, Tommy, Martin and Marian, went for a long walk. We didn’t know each other too well, but it wasn’t difficult to click with them. I

had never had such a feeling of being in the right place at the right time as I did then. In the deepest sense, I knew that all was well. When you have lived a life where all is far from well, that feeling is precious. Here I was, with new friends who seemed more like brothers. As we laughed and joked and talked about our experiences, I knew that this was where I belonged. In this meeting place of different cultures, some funny things happened. Nawaz was a great guy but his Eastern ways were a bit different from ours! One day, walking down the street with Tommy, he grabbed Tommy's hand. To him, that was just a normal sign of friendship, but in Tommy's circles, it definitely was not! As I sat and talked with Nawaz one day, he put his hand on my leg. Touching was normal in his culture - but rather strange in mine! I grinned and said,

'You can't do that mate. We don't do that where I come from!'

So, poor Nawaz got his first lessons in Western culture.

One of the first teacher's I met was Neil Tye, who came from London.

'Do you know what the name Neil means?' he asked. 'It means "Victorious or Champion."'

My middle name is Christian. My surname Harvey, I later discovered, means 'strong and eager for battle.' Put that lot together and my name is Victorious Christian Champion, Who Is Strong And Eager For Battle.

I was thrilled.

'Did God name me?' I wondered. 'He has given me a whole new identity.'

I still thought about Mark and wondered what he was up to. Often, God woke me in the early hours of the morning, telling me to pray for him. When I told Mark about those times, he said that it often happened at the time when he was in a tricky situation or up to no good. My heart's desire was that he would be saved and that we would work together for God. Instead of delivering drugs, we would deliver a message about God.

God was doing so much in my life and was really helping to rebuild the important things.

One day when I came back from a run, as I stood outside the college looking over the lake,

God spoke in my heart.

‘Why don’t you write your father a letter?’

He began to show me times when I had embarrassed my father because of my lifestyle. So,

later that day, I wrote a letter to him saying that I was sorry. It was part of God’s rebuilding

of our relationship.

## Chapter 18

### Karen

I had been praying for a wife for quite a while. I'd had plenty of girlfriends in the past, but I knew that as a Christian, I had to treat women very differently. God meant me to be faithful to one woman for life and to take responsibility for my own family.

By this time, I was used to getting real answers to prayer. God had guided me in so many ways, yet nothing seemed to happen in answer to this prayer. I could not understand why God was delaying and I was actually a bit annoyed with Him. I felt in my heart that He wanted me to pray, so that He could speak to me, but I told Him,

'I don't really want to talk to you!' I was sulking.

On the following Sunday morning, in church, a friend, Eva, told me.

'The other day, when I was praying, I felt that God wanted me to tell you something.' She looked me firmly in the eye and added, 'God wants you to know that He is working on it.'

I was amazed!

'God, you are so awesome!' I told Him. 'I did not want to talk to you and you sent someone else to give me your message!'

Tommy and I lived in a building called the Disciple House, helping take care of a group of boys. Their lives had been similar to ours and they had plenty of problems. Some of them were fresh from that troubled life and so they needed plenty of encouragement.

In the Staff Team (a group of student leaders who acted as a link between students and teachers, and who organised different events), I was responsible for evangelistic outreaches in Denmark, supporting churches. There were about 8 evangelism teams, each with a leader. They sometimes took church meetings, helping with preaching, worship, drama and other

things. As well as organising this, I was Peter's teacher's assistant, so I was very busy. Just as I had done in the army, I thrived on the challenge.

One of the girls on the Staff Team was Karen. She was Danish, slender and pretty, with a quiet and gentle nature. Karen had prayed asking God that if it was His will for her to attend Bible School, He would send the money that she needed through the post. When 50,000 kroner (about £5,000) came through the mail, enough to finance her for a year, she decided to spend the year studying counselling. Karen was asked to join the staff team at the end of the first year when she was about to go home. She did not accept, because she felt quite at peace about her decision to go home. However, three people came to her independently and told her that she was making a mistake. Peter also called her into his office and warned her that she would lose out if she did not return for a second year at college. Karen gave it a lot of thought and finally decided to do the second year. In that second year, Karen and I worked together on the Staff Team. The more time I spent with her the more my feelings started to grow into something other than friendship.

One day, when she walked into the room, my heart felt as if it would explode and I knew I had fallen in love with her. I still did not tell her how I felt, or ask her out. Wanting to be sure I was doing the right thing. I went to talk to Peter. It was Friday evening. Peter gave me a book called 'Boundaries in Dating' and told me to read the book and then talk to him again before I said anything to Karen. I stayed up all night to read the book and managed to read about 75 pages!

On Saturday, as I was sitting in the dining hall, she walked in and my heart exploded again. 'I have to tell her,' I thought. I followed her and found her alone, doing some craft work. 'Do you mind if I say something to you?' I asked. Karen looked at me expectantly and, shaking like a leaf, I opened my mouth to speak. No words came out. What an embarrassment! I put my hands over my face, said sorry and ran

out the room to pull myself together. After about fifteen minutes, I went back to see her. After apologising, I managed to say, 'I was wondering if you would have a coffee, or go for a walk with me. I really need to say something to you.'

We arranged to meet at the Disciple House. I had told Tommy and he was upstairs praying for me! Unknown to me, Karen had a good idea what I was going to say and she had asked a friend to pray, too. For her, the big stumbling block was that I was not from Denmark and she found the idea leaving her family and moving to another country frightening.

I gathered the courage to tell her how I felt about her. To my amazement, because I really thought she would turn me down, she told me sweetly that she felt the same way.

'I noticed you in the very first week,' she told me later. 'You stood out as a leader from the beginning. Do you remember that game of Fox and Hounds at the student camp? I was the fox and I'm a good runner. I can catch most people, but I could not catch you, because you were so fit. And then, there was the way you looked – like my idea of a typical British hooligan, square and muscular with lots of tattoos. It was so different from the way you really were, kind and gentle and full of fun.' Well, of course, I was pleased by those comments. Karen continued, 'There was that other game where you had to be the chief. For the rest of the year, everybody called you Chief. They knew you were a leader. It was obvious to everyone after only a couple of days. You had charisma and you were kind to everybody.' As I absorbed these wonderful compliments, she continued, 'I so wanted to go to those prayer meetings you started. But I would have had to speak English and I did not have the confidence.'

It was wonderful to have brought our feelings out into the open. Full of happiness, we talked about spending time getting to know each other better.

Afterwards, I told Tommy the good news.

'It was worth coming to Denmark, then,' he said, with a grin on his face.



On Monday morning, I had to tell Peter what had happened. I wondered if he would be mad at me.

‘Peter, I have something to tell you. I have told Karen, I just couldn’t help myself. It just blurted out!’ Peter burst out laughing because of my Welsh accent and the way I expressed myself. He has teased me about it ever since.

However, it wasn’t long before my feelings of rejection threatened to spoil things. When I thought Karen was looking at someone else, I was very jealous. Often, I felt rejected and left out. One night when Karen was going for a coffee with a friend, I felt physically sick. That knot in my stomach was back again. I had had some very damaging relationships with girls in the past, and rejection and jealousy were a natural response when girlfriends were unfaithful. I knew there was no need for that now. Karen was a good girl and had only ever had one boyfriend in her life. I began to realise that there was something wrong.

I admitted all this to Karen and she suggested that I go for counselling. In the past, I would have never had done that, thinking it was a sign of weakness. Now, I realised that to seek help was not a sign of weakness but a sign of maturity and being open to change.

Birgit was one of the teachers and counsellors at the college. We met and talked and it soon became obvious that I had a serious problem with rejection. I began to realise that most of my life had been dominated by this sense of rejection and that it lay behind all my other problems. We talked about my life, the many mistakes I had made and the hurt that was still deep within me. Gradually, I remembered events that I had not thought about for a long time. Then, one day, I had a powerful vision. I saw a big black bird like a crow, sitting on a stand. I had a strong feeling that this bird had been in my life for a very long time. As I looked at it, it made me feel dirty, and negative feelings like rejection and failure surged up inside me. This big black bird seemed to represent all the bad stuff in my life. Every so often, the bird shuffled its feathers and dust of some kind came from it, making the feelings worse. Then, it

was as if God showed me when this black bird came into my life, and it was when I was about 14. I saw myself lying on my bed and hearing people downstairs say how much trouble I was. Then I saw this black bird coming into my life, bringing horrible feelings of rejection with it.

Then something wonderful happened. I saw a huge golden eagle flying towards the black one. As it got closer, the black bird flew away. It didn't even put up a fight. Then the eagle took its place on the stand while I watched in awe. It looked beautiful and powerful and it changed the whole dark scene until it was full of light. God showed me that this was a vision of the process of healing taking place in my life. The black feelings would go and the healing represented by the great eagle would come.

Through those counselling sessions, I was healed as God had promised. I knew that a time was bound to come when my healing would be tested, and it did. But those overwhelming feelings of rejection have never come back. God has healed me.

I am glad that I said 'Yes' to counselling. If I had not, maybe that big black bird would still be there today.

'Pastor Roy! Pastor Stuart! It's great to see you both!' I grinned at them delightedly.

The two men wrapped me in bear hugs as we greeted each other. They had come all the way from Wales to Denmark to see me.

It really was a joy to see them. It was rare for someone's pastor to come and visit them in the college and I felt quite special.

'We would love you to come back to Wales and work at Brackla Tabernacle for two years,' Pastor Roy told me. 'We'd like you to work with younger people, in the church and the community. We'll train you further while you are there and at the end of the two years we will consider whether you are the right sort of person to become a church minister.'

‘I’d love to,’ I told them. ‘But I have to think of Karen and the way she might feel about moving to a strange country. Please would you give us time to talk and pray about whether this is God’s will?’

Of course, Pastor Roy and Stuart agreed to this. We all went out for a meal that night so they could meet her. Karen and I had been dating for only about two months at that time, and she was in crisis about moving away from her family and friends to a strange new country. Pastor Roy seemed to sense this and spoke to her with tears in his eyes.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said gently.

Karen was very moved, feeling that in a prophetic way, Roy was giving her a message from God Himself.

When the two pastors had gone home, Karen and I prayed about their offer and decided to accept. It was a costly decision for Karen, because it meant leaving all that she knew and loved, and for me because it meant going back to face all the people and temptations that I had known in my old life.

The plan was that Karen would stay to work in the college for a year and that I would move back to Wales and work in the church. Every month, I stayed in Denmark for 10 days, until we got married. I remembered that, before I even met Karen, I had asked Peter what he thought I should do when I left college and, for some reason, he said that I would travel back and forth from Wales to Denmark. It was as if God had shown him something of what the future would hold.

Just before I moved back to Wales, I had a phone call.

‘You’ll never guess what!’ said Simon’s excited voice. ‘Mark has given his life to Jesus!’

‘What?’ I shouted, thrilled. I’d heard that Mark and Simon had spent a lot of time together and that Simon had been trying to tell him about Jesus.

Mark came onto the line. He was bubbling with joy, assuring me that this was for real.

‘I felt like hitting him a few times,’ he told me, ‘But Simon has got through to me. When you come home, I want you to come and see me and pray for me.’

I was overjoyed, remembering my prayers for us to work together for Christ.

But I was not prepared for what was to come!

## Chapter 19

### Revival!

Back in Wales, I went to see Mark, to pray for him. It was hard to believe it was the same person. He was on fire, bubbling with happiness and talking about Jesus and the great experience he'd had. I intended to pray with him and lead him to the Lord, helping him take the next step with God, but it was obvious that he had already arrived at that. We sat for hours, just talking about God. To celebrate his new start, Mark decided to change his name and be known by his Italian one, Marco.

My job was to work with the church's youth group. Every month, I travelled to Denmark, exactly as Peter had said. There, I spent time with Karen and taught at the College, gaining further valuable experience.

Haydn and Ruth moved to a new home and Simon and I were able to move into their old one, living with one of their sons, David. I found it astonishing that I was now living in the house where it all started for me. 'I have brought you back here to give you victory where you were once defeated,' God seemed to say in my heart.

There was a television series at that time called 'Men Behaving Badly.'

'This house should be called "Men Behaving Godly,"' Simon commented. I laughed.

One morning, I began to get ready for the day ahead, as usual. Although I had been seeking God and longing to know him more, I was completely unprepared for what would happen next. Suddenly and completely unexpectedly, I had a vision. On the cross, Jesus hung dying. He seemed immense and I felt very small as I gazed up at him. He looked back at me, His eyes full of love. In that moment, I saw agonizingly clearly all the bad stuff in me and I knew that He could see it, too. Deeply ashamed, I thought that Jesus might withdraw his love from

me. He didn't. Instead, His eyes pierced me with love. I felt ashamed that he could love me so much, when my love for Him was so weak. As I hung my head, I felt someone pouring some substance over my head and my whole being. It felt like pure love; I cannot describe it any other way. A famous preacher by the name of Charles Finney, who must have had a similar experience, called it 'liquid love'. The revelation shook me to the core. I wept as, for a whole hour, Jesus continued to pour out his love upon me. I tried with all my heart to love him back, but my love seemed utterly inadequate compared with His. Jesus showed me that whatever I do for Him, I must give him all the glory to Him. Then, with a last reminder that His love would always be the same, the vision withdrew. I knew I would never be the same again.

Our wedding day drew near. Karen and I had no idea where we would live; we just believed that God would meet our needs.

One night, I dreamed about a pastor called Peter Keevil. It was brief so I forgot all about it, until I met him at friend's house. I remembered the dream and realised that God had set up our meeting. Peter told me that he was leaving Wales.

'We are going to Chile as missionaries. I have been wondering whether I should offer to rent my house to you,' he added.

'Wow!' I thought. 'God has provided us with a home!'

Then, we were given a car. Everything was falling into place as God provided everything we needed.

'Neil, God has spoken to me!'

Simon's expression betrayed his excitement. He had heard from God about something close to his heart.

'He's told me to start a meeting for people living the way we used to live - drug addicts, dealers, alcoholics, people with life-controlling problems of all kinds.'

'Wow! That's great,' I responded, catching the vision at once.

‘He gave me a dream,’ Simon continued. ‘I was standing on a beach, watching the waves as they broke on the shore. Every time a wave came in and went out again, there was a new person standing on the shore. I think God was promising that He will bring people in on the waves of His Spirit. Sometimes it will be only one at a time, but He said that I should just keep on going. He told me, “Open the doors and worship me and I will do the rest.”’

That conversation took place when I was still a student in Denmark.

Now, together with my closest friends, Marco and Simon, I made a commitment to obey the God-given vision. We held the first meeting at Cornelly Apostolic Church on the Sunday after I came home. The little Apostolic church welcomed the meeting and gave Simon a key to open the church. Mostly older people who had lived godly lives, they were very different from the people who came to the meeting, but they cared enough to share their building and pray for the new people who came. Really, we were planting a church within a church, made up of lost and hurting people who had made bad choices, including some well-known criminals and drug addicts from the area.

The church began to fill up with troubled people who had heard what had happened to Marco and me and wanted to find out more about it. Around twenty came every week and at least one of them would ask Jesus to save him and change his life. At first, we had no-one to lead worship, so we put on a DVD of worship music with the lyrics at the bottom of the screen. It did not matter. People still enjoyed singing and learnt to worship God.

Most of them were men, though some women came, one of them a spiritualist. Some people were alcoholics who left their cans of beer outside the door and picked them up after the meeting. Others brought in flagons and swigged cider during the worship time before lifting their hands in worship again. They would give me cheesy grins when I looked around, testing the boundaries to see how much they could get away with. One of them sang at the top of his voice, ‘I love Jesus. He’s the one that I want,’ slurring drunkenly at the same time,

like the worst kind of pub singer. I chuckled to myself, savouring the thought that these people, with all their weaknesses and needs, felt able to come and hear about the love and power of God.

Soon, there was a lot of talk on the streets about what was happening with a generation of drug addicts and dealers in Cornelly. Other people thought that Marco and I were using the church as a front to sell drugs. Before long, I had a telephone call from the police inviting me to the station for a chat! It felt great to be able to assure these policemen, who had known me for a long time, that what was happening was the real deal. It was brilliant to see and it was also great that Simon, Marco and I were working together. As time went by, it was obvious that God was doing something very special in our community.

The pressure of the work was great, though. After a time, Simon stepped down from leadership. We missed him, but we carried on and saw miracle after miracle as God transformed people's lives. Somebody called it a mini revival and I really believe that is true. We have seen God touch a whole generation of drug dealers and drug addicts, even reducing drugs abuse and crime on the streets.

'If this carries on,' said one officer, 'we'll be out of a job.'

After a day's work in the community I would go home buzzing, and having to stay awake for hours because of the excitement of what God was doing. People were pressing in on every side asking questions, asking for prayer and saying they want to give their lives to Jesus.

In God's perfect timing, I was ordained as a minister in the Apostolic Church and became minister of the very church where I had attended Sunday School, where my friends Haydn and Ruth were members and where people had faithfully prayed for me when I was in prison. I became a living demonstration in my village that God is real and answers prayer. It has been amazing to say the least.



Things are not always easy. We were, and are, in a spiritual battle. Once we had taken our stand as Christians, people exposed what was in them by the way they responded to us.

Kevin had been a drug addict for many years, until his liver was almost destroyed. He met God while he was in prison but, back among his old pals, he slipped back into his old ways for a while. He was one of those that came and got things right in his life.

I discovered that some local witches were casting spells and trying to curse us. One girl we knew well, a former friend, was a witch. During meetings, she stood across the road and cursed us. One day, I met her in the street.

‘Still “covered by the blood”?’ she asked, her attitude sinister and threatening.

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘And He loves you, too. His blood has power to save people.’

She did not reply, but I knew that my words made her very angry.

She cursed Kevin to his face.

‘Watch out! I’m going to get you,’ she told him. ‘You won’t know when it is coming, but you are cursed!’

Kevin told us about this and we prayed with him.

‘When people walk by faith in Jesus Christ, they walk in His blessing and not in satanic curses,’ I told him.

People who have taken drugs face constant temptation to go back to their old life. They have to learn to pray and read the Bible, and to walk with God by faith. It was not unusual for new Christians to drop out for a while and return to their old ways before struggling back to God and faith again. Some have died because of past drug or alcohol abuse, their bodies unable to cope any longer. Our hope, however, is that they have gone to be with Jesus.

It has not been an easy ride and at times we have been down to three people. We have asked God whether He wants us to continue with the meeting. But every time we have prayed that prayer, someone has come into the church, there and then. God is still at work.

It is also high-pressure work. I was often exhausted, but gradually I was able to train people and put them in position, so that things run more smoothly nowadays. Marco, now our outreach worker, is an effective evangelist and brings his contacts to the meeting that is now called 'Changing Lives'.

The work and the stories go on. Some come out of prison and come straight to us. People are still being set free by the power of Jesus. We tell them we don't have anything to offer other than Jesus. He is the One who is able to do a thorough work in their lives. I feel very honoured and privileged to be part of all this. I would never have dreamed that that day when I walked out of that house all this would have followed. We can only stand in awe at the greatness of God and say, thank you Jesus for all that you have done!!!

## 'The Voice'

In times of trouble, I heard the voice.  
So gentle, so sweet, so full of love.  
The voice seemed ancient, full of experience.  
I knew it had spoken to many people in past times and that it would speak to many in the future.  
The voice had always existed, and always would.  
It somehow spoke truth to me.  
It knew me, even though I did not know it.  
Even though I did not know the voice, I knew it was true, there was no falseness, no harm.  
The voice.  
It was so comforting, it searched my heart with love.  
It wanted to become my friend.  
It showed me a place of peace.  
A place of beauty.  
The voice had many promises, promises it could keep.  
Promises of love, of happiness.  
The voice wanted to express its hidden love and affection.  
But I had to say yes.  
The voice, it would not force itself upon me.  
It gently asked me to invite him in.  
Who's voice was it?  
Did it belong to somebody?  
In my suspense, I asked.  
Who is behind the voice?  
There was no other voice like it.  
It once again told me of love, a love so powerful nothing could stand in its way.  
It showed me a place of healing, of forgetting.  
A place I never thought existed.  
But I was wrong, oh, so very wrong.  
The voice said 'Now is the time'.  
It showed me a way I had never seen before.  
Once again I asked 'Who is behind the voice'?  
Then very gently I heard the most beautiful name.  
The name was Jesus.  
I had to respond.  
The voice took me into the future, a new start, a new beginning.  
The voice has been there since that day.  
It has never left me, and it never will.  
It will guide me all the days of my life.  
It will guide me always  
It will guide me to heaven where, one day, I will see, face to face, Jesus, the man behind the voice.

