

A Short Autobiography – Part One

January 1973. Britain is finally in Europe. Whopee! Ted Heath is desperately trying to control the runaway inflation rate. Frazier and Foreman fight on the 22nd of the month in Kingston, Jamaica. Vietnam is on the verge of peace. Last financial year, Australia accepted 140,000 migrants from around the world. A record 32,280 said ‘Thanks very much’ but decided not to stay. Almost 20,000 came back home to England and Ireland.

The intercity from Sheffield to St Pancras stood idle somewhere north of Watford. Minutes ticked into hours. Aunt Betty would be whittlin’ her socks off, we said ten o’ clock at the latest, at this rate we’d be lucky to make it by midnight. I couldn’t help thinking of that old Chinese proverb – ‘owd it go? ‘A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.’ Ours had begun with British Rail. Before the night was out, British Rail had partially made amends. They laid on a bus. The stationmaster at St Pancras, resplendent in striped suit and bowler hat personally directed us through the foggy, deserted streets of south London to the door of Aunt Betty’s flat in Clapham Common. She’d waited up! We ate supper at two o’clock in the morning in front of a little gas fire. I always meant to apologise to her for that night, it was our last in England, we wouldn’t see her for another five years.

I remember snowflakes falling on the passenger terminal at Southampton Docks. Masses of people were milling around, the huge hall echoed to the sobs and wails of deserted grandma’s, deserted mums and dads, deserted brothers and sisters. I was glad we’d said our goodbyes in Sheffield, too far for dad to travel. A huge white liner lay alongside, about to be pelted with coloured streamers and driven out to sea in shame for carrying away the cream of a nation. From the deck we looked down on the heads of all those people whose lives were about to change forever, the one’s leaving and the ones being left and I thought; United! United are playing here tomorrow at Southampton – and I’m leaving! How can I? I wonder if the captain would delay departure for a day? Nah. Maybe I could jump ship and hide under a tarpaulin? At that moment a snowflake went down my neck, it was snowing heavier now, if this keeps up the game could be off. No point missing out on a trip to Australia for the sake of an abandoned match. C’mon Onassis, get this tub underway. Australia won’t wait forever.