

Forgiveness

PART ONE

This is an extract from *God's Great Mystery Trip (from Atheist to Chaplain in Fourteen Days)* by Scott Fellows

It's June 1982. Scott is teaching English in a rough, tough inner-city comprehensive. Although at this stage in his life he is an atheist he is about to get a first taste of emotions which, years later, would develop into a Christian ministry. In this extract we join the school disco. Earlier that day Scott had had a confrontation with one of the fifth years, Jimmy Hatton, the school bully, who had arrived in his class with F*** OFF written in marker pen across the top of his shaved bald head...

'Alright, uptight and outta sight, we're getting on down tonight! Let's party!' I wondered where they had dug up this DJ from. He looked like a fugitive from the sixties with shoulder-length hair, enormous sideburns and a shirt that I was sure I'd seen in the Oxfam shop on Hyde Road last week. I hadn't heard anybody speak like that since 1971. The music was deafening and reduced all communication to the level of sign language. It must be said that the language involved wasn't overly sophisticated. A sharp flick of the boy's head towards the back exit signalled 'Do you want a snog and a fumble round the bike sheds?' A V-sign from the girl signalled that the offer was declined.

I was amused to see the arrival of Sue, Sharon and Hazel, the 'slags' of the fifth. Hazel was triumphantly holding hands with a Rod Stewart look alike. Sue was scowling at the lad who took turns between smiling sweetly at Hazel and mouthing obscenities at Sue.

'Ah young love,' I thought.

'Hey, Mr Fellows, Sir! We didn't know you were gonna be here.' It was James Hatton

making a beeline for me accompanied by his entourage. I turned to face Jimmy straight on:

'Look Jimmy, we're all here to have a good time. Now why don't you and your friends go and get yourself a drink and relax?' I was determined to hold my own against this group of thugs. I stared at Jimmy.

'Oh Sir, don't get worked up. Look, see!' Hatton took off his bobble hat to reveal a bare bald head. 'All gone!'

This struck Jimmy and his gang as hilarious, they sauntered over to the drinks counter amidst a great deal of mutual back slapping. Needless to say only soft drinks were being served that night, but I had a feeling that Jimmy had brought his own supply of harder stuff, judging by the number of times he and his mates disappeared, only to reappear noticeably worse for wear each time. The DJ had put on the

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new Marvin Gaye hit *Sexual Healing*. Jimmy's friends began to dance, knocking people over as they careered about. Jimmy looked approvingly on from the sidelines, somebody as cool as he was didn't actually dance of course. He called over to his mates,

'Go for it Iggy, give it some welly!' Iggy was trying his luck with Sue.

'Wanna drink?' Iggy leered into Sue's face. Sue looked unimpressed.

'Ooh Iggy, all my life has been a preparation for this moment!'

He tried again, starting to dance and bawling out the lyrics.

'This music gets into your soul. I should have been born black me!'

Sue was looking at his collar.

'Well you've made a good start with your neck love.'

Meanwhile I noticed that Sharon had sidled up to Jimmy, she was speaking to him, he moved closer so that he could hear.

'Are you dancing Jimmy?' she gave him a coy smile.

'Does it look like it?' Jimmy moved away.

'Come on.'

'Give us a break love. Not interested.'

'Feeling a bit rough Jimmy? Can't hold your drink?' Sharon's smile had turned into a sneer. 'Iggy seems fit enough.'

'Go and dance with him then.' Jimmy almost hissed out the words.

'I'd rather dance with you Jimmy.' The coy look had returned.

'And I'd rather dance with Iggy.'

I didn't particularly like Sharon much but seeing the crushed expression on her face made me angry. It had been a long difficult day and I was tired, most of all I was tired of people like Jimmy. I felt myself boiling over inside, even my carefully cultivated professionalism couldn't prevent what happened next. I walked straight up to Jimmy:

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'You really are a complete no hoper, aren't you Hatton? For nine months now you haven't lifted a finger in my lessons or in anybody else's for that matter. You go around insulting people and walk away laughing because you think it's clever. Well it's not clever, it's pathetic and so are your mates. Now get out and don't come back!'

Because of the volume of the music only I and Jimmy knew what had just been said, but everybody in the place knew that Mr Fellows had finally lost it. For once Hatton had no reply to make, he was shocked and surprised, he didn't believe I was capable of such genuine aggression, but he recognised it when he saw it. Jimmy signalled to his friends and they strolled out of the disco, as casually as possible. The DJ's imitation American accent broke into the music:

'Hey people, time to head for home, safe journey, God bless and don't give your granny any of that dope oh nooooo!'

I stayed behind with the other staff to help clear up. An hour later I wearily drove my car out of the school gates for the short drive home. I wondered how much longer I could take the daily punishment of working in an inner-city comprehensive. It seemed every kid had problems and most of them an attitude to go with it. Teachers were a soft target for their hang ups and frustrations because they couldn't hit back. I knew I shouldn't have lost it with Jimmy, maybe I shouldn't be a teacher at all. I turned onto the main road.

In my headlights I could see some lads running for the night bus which had stopped further up the road, but it began to pull away just as they reached it. One of them jumped onto the back bumper of the double decker, his body spread-eagled in a star shape across the rear engine housing. The bus gathered speed as it reached the part of the road that turned into a dual carriageway. I followed behind with mounting horror. The bus reached 40mph.

'My God, he's going to fall off!' I thought, and braked to create a gap between my car and the bus. I was frightened that if the lad fell off I would run over him. I could see that the boy's hands had only a fingertip hold on the rear window sill; his feet were balanced on no more than a two inch ledge formed by the junction between engine housing and bumper.

The bus lurched as it went over a bump in the road; the boy finally lost his grip and fell onto the tarmac, his body turning over and over again like a rag doll, arms and legs splayed out on each turn. With a sickening smack, the body hit the curb and came to rest; the bus disappeared into the night, the driver completely oblivious to everything.

I pulled over and ran to where the boy lay. His legs were smashed, laying at bizarre angles, his head jammed against the kerb, a trickle of blood ran out of the corner of Jimmy Hatton's mouth, his face ashen, his eyes closed.

'Jimmy, Jimmy!' I knelt beside him. Iggy and another boy were running up the road towards us, there was no one else around.

'Find a phone box, phone an ambulance. Now!'

They stopped dead in their tracks as they recognised me, then ran off in different

directions. I cradled Jimmy's head in the crook of my arm. The boy was groaning.

'Shh, you're going to be OK.'

Another car pulled up and a young couple got out, the girl covered her mouth with her hand when she saw Jimmy, her eyes were wide with shock, the man caught hold of one of Jimmy's legs, trying to straighten him out.

'Don't touch him, don't touch him.' I placed my body protectively between Jimmy and the man.

My head was whirling, powerful emotions were coursing through my body. I looked down at the face and the shaven head that had been the focus of my anger just an hour earlier and all I saw was just another screwed up kid. I still felt angry at Jimmy for being such an idiot to try and ride the night bus like some sort of cowboy on a bucking bronco. But there was something else, and it shocked me: I knew I would do whatever it took to protect this boy until help arrived. This loudmouthed bigot, this know-all hard case, was nevertheless my pupil, one of my kids, and I was his teacher. It was as simple as that.

After what seemed an age, I could see a blue light flashing in the distance.

■ Scott Fellows

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Scott Fellows spent nearly 30 years teaching, both abroad and in the UK. He became a Christian in 1983 and started a music ministry called 'Freedom' which has performed and led worship all over the North of England.

In 2004, after working for ten years as an LEA Adviser and Ofsted Inspector, Scott semi-retired and took a part-time post as Chaplain at an FE college in Manchester where he now works.

God's Great Mystery Trip (from Atheist to Chaplain in Fourteen Days) by Scott Fellows, available for £9.95 (plus £1.50 p&p) from:

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