

Dickie Denton

A TRUE STORY OF LOVE, LIFE AND BELONGING

FEELING BLUE



FOREWORD BY PETER DRURY

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Baptism

I CAN still remember so vividly when and where it all started. Sometimes, when a sterile Premier League game feels like the product of a corporate marketing department, I wish I could go back and relive it. I wish it even more so during lockdown. I wish it for my nephews and nieces and for the generation of football followers yet to come, but especially I wish it for those of my generation. For those boys, now middle-aged men, who once they had experienced it, were hooked for life. I wish to relive it apart from one small detail, and that I will come to later.

The date was 30 November 1974. The venue: West Didsbury, Manchester.

For days I had been begging my father to take me to the match. I am sure we called it ‘mithering’ back then. He had promised to take my two brothers but, my eight and a half years were deemed to be too young. At nine and ten, my brothers were not much older, but I suppose that he thought that being responsible for all three young Denton boys might be too much of a handful. He was not a football man, my father; in fact, nobody in the family was.

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Michael James Denton was born in Northampton, of lower middle-class stock. He failed his 11-plus examination but was the first member of his family to win a place at university. After graduating in physics he went on to become a textile scientist. A late convert to Catholicism, he met my mother, Anne, via Manchester University's Catholic Society. He never returned to live in Northampton because my mother was south Manchester through and through. At the age of 25, her father, Walter, had been appointed as the city's youngest ever headmaster at St Cuthbert's Catholic Primary School in Withington. He remained in that position for some 40 years until he retired in 1969.

My mother, the youngest of Walter and Annie's three children, attended St Cuthbert's and then Loreto College. When she met my father, she was studying for a degree that serious illness prevented her completing. In 2009, two days after my parents' 50th wedding anniversary, I took my mother back to Manchester to revisit some of her childhood memories. We stopped the car outside St Cuthbert's and decided to ask if we could enter. Fully expecting, in these days of high security, to be asked to leave the moment the CCTV captured us at the gate, we tried the intercom and explained to the receptionist my grandfather's past status in the school.

'Oh, you mean Mr Clift,' she said, as if he were still the incumbent headmaster.

It had been 40 years since his retirement and another 20 since his death. The receptionist also happened to be an ex-pupil and welcomed us with genuine warmth as she showed us round the building, my mother seeing memories at every turn. It was a special moment for both of us.

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Michael Denton and Anne Clift married, at St Cuthbert's Church of course, in April 1959. Within a few, action-packed years they had fulfilled their devout Catholic duty and brought forth six young Dentons. Born in March 1966, I was the last. To be factually correct they did only bring forth five children biologically; my brother David was adopted prior to my birth. My siblings and I could only see him as our brother, but as I grew up, I became increasingly aware that those around us often saw him differently. I do not know a lot about my brother David's parentage and birth other than that he was born in London of an Asian mother and adopted by my parents before his second birthday via a Manchester-based Catholic adoption society. I do not believe that David knows any more himself.

So, we were a family of eight: my parents, followed by my three sisters Elizabeth, Katherine, and Rachel and my two brothers Alban and David. Like all my siblings, I was delivered into the good care of the nurses at Withington Hospital, where on a good day and with a fair wind you could hear the roar from the Maine Road crowd. At least that is what I like to think. We lived initially in Heaton Mersey, Stockport, in a three-bedroom, semi-detached house so typical of 1930s suburban development. Eight was a squeeze, but that soon became nine when my paternal grandfather Arthur, or Poppa as he was known to us, moved in following the death of my grandmother. The rapid expansion of the Denton family necessitated a bigger house and in 1973 we moved to 1 Winster Avenue, West Didsbury.

With six hungry mouths to feed, bodies to clothe and minds to stimulate, my parents were kept busy. We were

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not poor in the Dickensian sense, but each penny had to be counted. My mother's two elder siblings had produced offspring with similar ruthless efficiency which meant that we were never short of hand-me-downs from our many cousins. Football, though very much a working man's game in 1974, was a luxury to the Dentons, an unnecessary financial indulgence and an unwelcome disruption. Six children between the ages of eight and 14 required routine, structure, and order. Football, with its chaos and unpredictability, was the antithesis of that. Not surprisingly, my exposure to football had therefore been sparse. I am not even sure why I wanted to go to the match. No doubt a youngest sibling's natural fear of missing out was a big part of it. There was a lot of that about when there were six of you separated by seven years.

My interest in football was not particularly strong. I recall redeeming several Typhoo Tea vouchers in exchange for a picture of Gordon Banks, and my brother Alban had a picture of George Best on our shared bedroom wall. We had an outdated *Shoot!* album, bought from a jumble sale or church Christmas fayre, but it was rarely looked at with any interest. The battered Subbuteo set, so old that the figures were made from card and not plastic, had been donated by a kindly neighbour but it rarely saw the light of day. Despite this tepid interest I desperately wanted to go.

The haranguing of my father continued through the morning and up to lunchtime, with no quarter given on either side. I remember my father finally ordering, 'Right everyone who wants to go to the match had better get ready – coats, hats, scarves.' I needed no further encouragement.

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I was 'everyone'. Before my brothers could locate and don their anoraks, I stood ready and waiting by the front door. Coated, hatted, and scarfed to the eyeballs, probably also with wellington boots. I still half expected to be left behind, to be told that my father had not intended to include me. It did not happen and I would be going to the football. I looked like Paddington Bear but I felt like Cinderella.

I am sure that everyone has had just one or two moments in their life where the direction of it, either through conscious decision or twist of fate, is set in stone. Life-defining moments. Mine was the first time I walked into a football stadium on that fateful November day – a typical, grey, Manchester afternoon. From that moment my life changed forever.

There was the pulsating noise and the hypnotic movement of the crowd, singing and swaying in unison; 60,000 eager and expectant voices. I could almost reach out and touch the atmosphere, so dense was it with the essence of real lives and working men at leisure. My nostrils were drawn to the sweet warm stench of cigarette and pipe smoke, the smouldering pies, the stale beer, and the meaty Bovril that drifted up the terraces. At pitch level it mingled with the earthy smell from the steaming grass and the human odour circling around me. I could taste it on my tongue.

Led by Dad, we worked our way through the thick forest of Manchester's masses to the front of the terrace. I had never been exposed to the physical proximity of so many bodies. Totally absorbed and oblivious to any potential danger around me, I felt not fear from the crush of the crowd but the caress of a community. I could see the Wagon Wheels, the crisps, and the pies as I watched the refreshment sellers'

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parade around the pitch, trays in front of them, white straps across the chest like Christmas drummer boys. There was no chance that I would get my hands on any of their wares – the Dentons did not buy snacks, but like Charlie Bucket salivating over a scumdiddlyumptious candy bar, the vicarious thrill was enough for me. That was because by now I had more glorious things to be concerned with. I had seen football pitches on television, and even played on them at Wythenshawe Park, but nothing could have prepared me for the sight I now beheld.

Before me lay the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my short life. The greenest green there ever could be, a shimmering grass carpet, framed with crisp white lines. Under the bright floodlights that pierced the fading Manchester afternoon it glistened and gently breathed. Not so much a piece of grass but a stage for life's drama. Little did I know that it would become the unbidden stage for much of my own life's drama.

Despite being totally enthralled with the surroundings and the occasion, something intuitively told me all was not right. This one minor detail was confirmed when the crescendo of noise signalled the teams' entrance on to the pitch. There was no piped anthem or orchestrated handshakes in 1974. I arched my neck and stuck my head through the bigger bodies in front of me, trying to get a glimpse of the players as they emerged from the tunnel in the opposite stand. And then I saw those red shirts run on to the pitch. To my right, the roar 'U-NI-TED, U-NI-TED' went up from the Stretford End. I was at Old Trafford, the home of Manchester United.

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The match itself was something of a classic and features on the BBC's *Best of Match of Day* compilation DVD. The Denton boys and their father were just four bodies among the 60,324 there to watch United beat Sunderland 3-2, during their one season of Second Division purdah. We were stood on the paddock that is known today as the Sir Alex Ferguson Stand. My memories of the game itself are a bit of a blur. I recall Stuart Pearson scoring the first goal and then the feeling of outrage and injustice as Sunderland hit back twice in quick succession. The crowd sang Willie Morgan's name after he scored in the second half and generally did everything expected of a 1970s winger – nice hair, shame about the end product. The Stretford End taunted the Sunderland fans with cries of 'Geordies, Geordies', and when I asked Dad why, he, ever the stickler for detail, asserted they were not Geordies, as they came not from Newcastle, but were in fact Wearsiders. My father was never one to miss an educational opportunity regardless of the occasion.

Ninety minutes had never flown by so quickly and once the final whistle had sounded, the rush, push, and crush to squeeze the mass of impatient bodies through the narrow exits began. I must have been scared but mostly I recall the exhilaration and adrenaline being stronger than the fear. I felt pride that I did not cry, unlike my brother David, as we got engulfed by the swarming bodies and momentarily lost contact with Dad. Outside the ground the scene really did resemble a Lowry painting as we started to make our way home. The floodlit stadium behind us was glowing in the autumn night sky; the last of Salford's industry was churning out its smoke, and the residential chimneys of the

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terrace houses betokened the warm hearths and homes that lay beneath. Thousands of cloth-capped, duffel-coated match stalk men dispersed in all directions. At least, that is how I remember it. The likelihood is that it was all parkas, scarves tied around wrists, flared trousers, and Doc Marten boots.

We walked home through the navy-blue Manchester evening, the drizzle dancing like fireflies in the headlights of the cars that slowly filed away from the stadium. The distance was about three miles, but we were used to it. We had a family car, in fact we had a camper van, but walking was a good and wholesome activity. I watched orange bus after orange bus pass us by, both decks illuminated in the darkness, standing room only. The dear old ladies, out for their afternoon visits or shopping trips, laden bags resting on knees, were unexpectedly swamped by the celebrating hordes with their red-white-and-black scarves. As we got further from the ground the buses dispersed in multiple directions across the city and towards the centre.

If the Saturday night TV dinner had become a widely adopted convention by 1974, it had yet to make any impression on the Denton household. Breaks with tradition generally arrived under my parents' suspicious gaze quite some time after the rest of society had embraced them. Consequently, dinner was a formal occasion with nine of us around the large wooden kitchen table, the only external interference being from Radio 4, or Radio 2 – the BBC of course. ITV and commercial radio came into the 'questionable and not to be trusted' category. While we were having dinner – or tea as we Manchester folk called it – Dad called for quiet. Something on the radio had captured his

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attention and within seconds it also held me captivated. He was listening to a report from a football match – but not just any one. It was *the* match report from Old Trafford. Not only had I enjoyed the most exhilarating afternoon of my life, but the BBC were now talking about it on national radio. I had taken part in a newsworthy event. The action I had witnessed in person was now being described to the millions of people out there. Being a part of the nation's news – how cool was that?

There remained one final act on this defining day. As I had watched the game, trying my best to absorb all that was happening around me, I noticed around the touchline a few red-tracksuited boys who were older than me. They were throwing the ball back to the players whenever it left the pitch. 'I could do that,' I thought to myself. I asked Dad how I could get this job. He said he did not know but he knew of a man who might be able to help. 'You should write a letter to the club secretary,' he told me. That same night, I did. Sat in my pyjamas, at the dining room table, I set the Woolworths writing pad in front of me, and with the neatest, most grown-up handwriting I could muster I laid out my credentials as to why I should be appointed to the position of ball boy at Manchester United Football Club. Dad looked up the address from the phone book and posted my letter. I fully expected a reply before the end of the weekend, acknowledging my kind offer and inviting me to report for duty the following week. I waited but the response never came. It was a disappointment, but one that was soon forgotten, because football had irrevocably hooked me. The only question now was which team?

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There are many ways by which an impressionable boy can choose his football team. To some people it is a decision of little importance that can be reversed at any time if a mistake has been made, the stark reality of youthful impetuosity exposed as the trophy cabinet lies perennially bare. For others, it is a life-defining and irreversible decision. If you allow it, one that will shape the person you become and your attitude to life. It can influence how you view others and how they view you. It can determine your friends, your job, your life partner and where you live. For the most loyal of supporters, it is for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. Choosing one's football club is, therefore, not an enterprise to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly; and, if not in the fear of God, then certainly in the fear of ridicule from friends and family. So, if you are about to commit your soul and fortune to this noble pursuit for ages yet to come, your choice had better be the right one. The problem is that nobody tells you any of this at the beginning.

I would expect that the most common influence on shaping this momentous decision comes from within the family. I did not have that sort of guidance; Dad was of little help. When I later insisted that he supported a team he chose Scunthorpe United by virtue of their place at the bottom of the Football League. My brothers had developed a passing interest in the Uniteds of Manchester and Leeds. The only one with any semblance of patronage was my paternal grandfather, Poppa, who frequently extolled the achievements of Northampton Town in the mid-1960s. Remarkably, the Cobblers, as he affectionately referred to them, went up from

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the Fourth Division to the First and all the way back down again, in successive seasons. Support Northampton Town? I might not have known much but what little I did I know told me that was never going to happen. Not streetwise enough about stylish kits, past trophies, or star players I was unable to base my decision on any of those considerations. Ultimately another great sphere of influence, the school playground, swayed me.

Paul Burns was the cool kid in Mr Donovan's class at St Aidan's Primary School. Well, as cool as an eight-year-old boy who was ridden into school in a seat on the back of his mother's bike could be (even then he had the air of Julius Caesar entering the Colosseum on his horse-drawn chariot). He was just one of those kids to whom others migrated and wherever he went at playtime you followed. I do not recall the conversation as being a particular long or deep one.

'Are we going to play football today, Paul?'

'I don't know, who do you support?'

I knew enough by now to know that there were only two possible answers to this question.

'Ummm. United, I think.'

'They're shit. You should support City, they're better.'

'Okay.'

That was it, done and dusted. A course set and a life long voyage into the unknown begun. The cool kid became my first best friend. Despite my association with Paul, I was never close to being the cool kid.

So all was good in this young man's life. Happy home, happy family, doing quite well at a school I liked, a reasonable number of friends and a football team to follow. There was

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hardly a 'blue Monday' in sight. What more could a young Manchester lad ask for in those innocent pre-Factory Records, Oasis and Hacienda days?

Life in our West Didsbury house was one of contentment and security. We did not have a life of luxury or indulgence, but it was a good one, protected from pretty much all the hardships of the world. My mother and father, through discipline, thriftiness, and industry, had turned the ramshackle house that they had scraped and saved to purchase into a homely family nest. We had what we needed but not much more. There was a garden big enough to get lost in and with sufficient nooks and crannies to serve any adventure. My siblings and I each had our own allotted vegetable patch; the crowning glory of mine was a 12-foot-high oak sapling that I had grown and nurtured from an acorn. We were surrounded by elderly neighbours who doted on the six young children that would sporadically lean over their fences in the hope of a glass of lemonade or an Uncle Joe's Mint Ball.

Holidays were only once a year, but that was fine. We never went far, but to me North Wales was every bit as exotic as Spain. The restless excitement of all eight of us lying on camp beds in the old barn on Mr and Mrs Cribb's farm near Porthmadog is a genuinely happy memory. I can still smell the paraffin lamp and picture the blue flame that flickered through the long summer nights as we drifted off to sleep.

Television was rationed and censored. BBC good, ITV bad. *Blue Peter* good, *Magpie* bad, *Look North* good, *Granada Reports* bad. Sunday night was a TV treat as Poppa cooked for my parents to give Mum a break. Bathed and in night clothes, we were permitted to crawl under the dining room table and

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watch *Dad's Army* as the adults ate. A dining table large enough to accommodate six squatters had to be of a certain stature. My father had bought it from his first employers, the Shirley Institute, for about £50 in 1973. When fully extended, with its six additional leaves, it transformed from a round table into an oval some 30 feet long. The only time it has ever been fully extended was on the two occasions it appeared on the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow* where its value was estimated at over £40,000. Not a bad little investment, and one that remained in the family until recently.

My other abiding memory of television was the day we all came home from school to one of Mum's 'announcements': Dad was going to appear on the BBC's early evening news and current affairs magazine programme *Nationwide*. The subject was, not surprisingly, related to the textile industry. We all duly huddled around the TV at six o'clock and listened in wonderment and pride as 'Mike Denton' was introduced. I did not have the first clue what he was talking about.

We had extended family close to us with Mum's siblings and my multitude of cousins. My maternal grandparents, known to us all as Nanna and Gangan, lived a couple of miles away. Visiting their Withington home was a treat that invariably ended with a trip to the local sweet shop that we christened 'Walter's' after my grandfather. My grandmother had a real skill for making the most imaginative and creative cakes featuring hedgehogs made from cocktail sausages and steam trains with liquorice spirals for wheels. She also had the consummate ability to make you feel and believe that you were her only grandchild rather than just one of 24.

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In common with many families of the day, the other major institutions in our lives were church and school. Unlike choosing your football team, religion was non-negotiable. My grandparents were Catholics, my parents were Catholics, I was baptised Catholic. I remain a Catholic. Church on Sunday was a must, and we celebrated the big public holidays with religious observance and social significance. Sundays had their own strict ritual with two choices. Dad liked to make the most of his weekends. By fulfilling his Catholic obligation early, he was left with a full day to complete the various gardening or household chores he had set himself and his reluctant sons. He therefore drove into the centre of Manchester to St Augustine's Church on Grosvenor Square where the city's only 6.30am Sunday Mass took place. As the concept of an alcohol-induced lie-in was an experience I had yet to encounter, I usually chose this option. The brevity of the Mass as well as the chance to relieve the boredom by being an altar boy made it a better prospect than the alternative.

That alternative accommodated a more leisurely start to the day with 9am Mass at St Cuthbert's with Mum and my grandparents. The extra couple of hours in bed did not compensate for the length of the Mass, the incessant singing, and the long, incomprehensible sermon. There was also little chance of being an altar boy, despite my grandfather's influence, as they seemed to have dozens of them. The service survived, there was then the ordeal of leaving church. Former teachers, pupils, class-mates of my mother and friends of my grandparents would accost us to say hello, rub my hair, pinch my cheeks, and generally do all those things that an eight-year-old boy despises.

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‘What do you want to do when you grow up?’ I would be asked for the fifth week running. ‘The same as last week, Mrs Jones. I want to waste all my youth, energy, money, and romantic intention following a terrible football team around the country until they win something long after you are dead.’

Then again, going to Mass with my grandparents did mean there was a chance that Gangan would reach into his deep pockets and retrieve a ten pence piece to be spent at Walter’s on the way home. In the end, 6.30am at St Augustine’s just about won the day.

I enjoyed my early school days, progressing steadily if not spectacularly. St Aidan’s, Wythenshawe, was a happy school, and I was a happy student. In my innocence I was blind to the fact that its location was in one of the more deprived areas of Manchester. The red-brick buildings were augmented by prefabricated classrooms to cope with the post-war baby boom. After working my way through Miss Binns, Mrs Costello and Mrs Hulse’s classes, I would complete my time there in the ‘prefabs’ in the charge of the guitar-strumming Mr Donovan. I enjoyed the classwork, regularly being incentivised by Dad to earn ten stars in a week, in order that I could be rewarded with a packet of Nice biscuits from the school tuck shop. I do not recall that I ever achieved it.

The highlight of the week was always Wednesday afternoons and hymn practice followed by football. I have never been a singer, but I did enjoy being part of the school choir and belting out such old rousing classics as ‘Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven’, ‘Faith of Our Fathers’ and ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’. It provided great vocal training for the times ahead on terraces up and down the country.

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Today, I cannot sing or hear the hymn 'Oh, the Love of My Lord is the Essence' without being immediately transported back to Mr Donovan's prefab and hymn practice, recalling the restless energy in anticipation of school football to follow.

I say football, when it was really more of a kick-about in the local Wythenshawe Park. Legendary City coach Malcolm Allison had trained his first-team squad in the park and if it was good enough for Colin Bell, Francis Lee, and Mike Summerbee, then it was certainly good enough for Dickie Denton. It was definitely the closest I had ever come to organised football. My only other opportunities to hone my beginner's technique was in the back garden at Winster Avenue – practice sessions which were usually cut short by Dad as he confiscated the ball as a result of a careless shot careering into his beloved dahlias. As I said, he was not a football man.

I so envied the boys in my class who had replica kits, even if they were all adorned in United red. All except for Paul Burns, that is, who was inexplicably the proud owner of an 'old gold' Wolves strip. Later in life I would take mischievous joy in reminding him of this aberration. The boys in kits, with proper football boots, looked like real footballers. They were smart and uniformed. With their iconic black socks, red and white trim on the overturned tops, they reminded me of the royal guardsmen that had captivated me during a recent family trip to London. Next to them, dressed in my yellow T-shirt, old shorts, and black plimsolls, I looked anything but the footballer. I so wanted a football kit, and I think that if any one of them had offered me theirs in exchange for my footballing allegiance I might just have sold my soul to the

Red Devil. They didn't, of course, and so, in the words of 'Oh, the Love of My Lord is the Essence', I did not 'turn from his presence' and 'walk other paths, other ways'.

It was another ordinary day when, one morning, Mum called a family meeting. Dad was at work and the six of us were summoned to the kitchen. That usually meant that one of us had done something wrong, and we were about to receive a lecture. After waiting until she had our undivided attention, she told us the news.

'We are going to move to a new house, in Leeds.'

'What?' 'Why?' 'When?' But most of all, 'Where?' or, as I really felt, 'Where the fuck is Leeds?'

Even though I had heard of Leeds, I did not have a clue where it was. I remembered hearing a report, a few weeks earlier, on the BBC about their football team's supporters rampaging round Paris's Parc de Princes stadium after the European Cup Final. These did not seem to be my kind of people.

I felt a little excitement, a sense of the adventure to come, but the overriding emotion was fear. The question I most dreaded asking was 'would I have to go to a new school' and of course the answer was 'yes'. As a painfully shy child, the prospect of a new school petrified me. My shyness extended to family. My cousins – who we did not see so often despite their proximity – put the fear of God into me and I would often be found hiding in the garden shed when they came to visit. There were so many of them; 18 between my mother's two siblings, mostly older and bigger than me. I just did not have a clue who each one was. A visit felt like a takeover of my home.

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So that was it; by the end of the summer I would have a new home, new town, and new school. Somehow, I was going to have to make new friends. But if anybody was going to make me have a new football team, they would need to think again.

Only later did I come to understand the reasons behind the move. My father had started his career as a textile scientist at a research organisation in Didsbury. From there his skills had come to the attention of the industry and he was persuaded to join the splendidly named Macclesfield-based textile machinery firm of Ernest Scragg. I never knew exactly what Dad did at Scragg's but from time to time he went off on business trips, usually to the Far East. On his travels he could not help but notice the emergence of the textile industry in Asia with the increased investment in research and technology. This, together with the low wage base, meant the writing was on the wall for the north-west's declining industry. Lancashire's days as the world leader were no more. When Leeds University came calling in 1975 and offered the relative security of an academic life, the decision to move the family was one of pragmatism and prudence. His post at the university also allowed him to indulge his passion for education and research. As a reader in the Department for Textile Industries he became one of the world's leading authorities on synthetic polymers.

Although less than an hour away, and only just over the brow of the Pennine hills that I could see from my attic bedroom window, Leeds could have been a thousand miles away and the other side of the Alps for all I cared. Before I could get comfortable with the idea of leaving St Aidan's,

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my friends, and familiarity, the end of term was upon us. For the final time we stood outside the school gates and watched Mum drive the blue VW camper van up and along Rackhouse Road. Already feeling scared and uncertain, I awaited my new life in Yorkshire.