

# Angels of Castlefield\*

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It was a terrible night. The rain had been pouring down relentlessly for some hours; heavy, unforgiving rain – rain with attitude. I was exhausted for some reason or another. I cannot remember why. I just wanted to lie down and let sleep come to me. I knew it would come easily tonight – as long as I could find a dry place to lay myself down.

Usually, I could sleep anywhere. I had an old vulcanised military over-coat with an extended back-flap that could be pulled down and over your legs, then ingeniously zipped up at the front, allowing it to double as a sleeping bag. Quite cosy and warm – an invention born from the motherly necessity of another age. I'd bought it from one of the army surplus stores on Tib Street. About twenty quid – a considerable but worthy investment.

I wandered around the worn cobblestone back-streets of Castlefield for a few hours, hunting for a dry patch to bed down. Unlike other parts of the city centre, I always felt safe in Castlefield. I must write elsewhere about the leaden, dense history of this place – truly, I was walking through time. The past towered above you, ran beneath your feet, enclosed you – not suffocated, but protected. There was an unearthly peace to be found amongst these raw, elemental relics of the industrial revolution densely packed in this sui generis quarter of Manchester.

(The psycho-geography of this place created a unique map that I pull these memories from; a living cartography of my past. The map is not the territory, but merely one representation of it. But it is my map, and my pulse creates its contours.)

Everywhere was sodden. Water fell in sheets from the Accrington brick arches of the Salford and Cornbrook viaducts; streamed down the imposing cast iron

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columns of the Great Northern viaduct, rivulets flowing round rusted rivets, forming pitch black pools shimmering with transient neon.

I marched on. The few open (and hidden) arches – some of my favourite lodgings - were all completely drenched. Cardboard fixtures sagged wearily under the weight of water they had absorbed, and the untidy piles of wooden crates and packing boxes created a sense of abandonment I'd not felt before. 'Move on', they whispered. 'Move on...'

Half-asleep, some primal instinct led me down towards the canal basin where I found a small empty car-park under a double span arch I'd never noticed before. The middle of the tarmac floor was slightly raised, and thus relatively dry. I re-arranged my coat, transforming it to its nocturnal function, lay down, pulled the hood over my head, and fell instantly into black sleep.

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Some murmuring. Aching joints. Stiffness. So very, very tired. Awake... It must be 1 or 2 a.m. I turn and lie on my back, unzip the hood of coat. Above me, two young women peer down.

"We're so... so... So sorry. I'm afraid... A delivery... expected... You must move... we're sorry."

A smile. God, when was the last time I had seen a smile like that? Such warmth and tenderness. A powerful inner beauty radiated outwards and lit-up the darkness – the formidable luminescence of compassion. I was in the presence of earthly angels, and it was sublime; wonderful.

I nodded sleepily, but happily, and began to ready myself to move onwards. I was vaguely aware of them conversing with one another in hushed tones a few meters from me. They had withdrawn, I supposed, to preserve my dignity as I unpacked myself from my makeshift sleeping bag.

I sat upright and began to roll a cigarette. "A couple of minutes... that ok?" ... nodding towards the tobacco and papers in my hands.

They scurried back towards me.

"Listen... You know, you can stay here tonight... If you like?"

I didn't know where 'here' was – they must have guessed that from the cautious look on my face.

"This is the YHA youth hostel – you're in the car park. We're quite quiet tonight. We can give you a room... but you must leave by eight... is that ok?" They looked at one another expectantly.

"I don't have any money." I shrugged, smiled sheepishly and held out my arms, palms up...

"No, no... Of course... It's fine, really. Come on – "

I shall never forget their kindness. Their smiles. Their sincerity. The quiet, confident ease with which they conducted themselves. In the harsh monochrome of that period of my life they stand out in glorious Technicolor.

They took me inside. A room. A bed. My God, a bed! A shower too – though I didn't dare use it. (I was scared of what would be revealed if I peeled my clothes away from my body. Water hadn't touched my skin for about two years at that point, and there were assorted sores and abscesses all over my body.)

I slept on the bed in my clothes – although I did take my boots off in deference to the luxury of my accommodation.

I slept like a king.

In the morning I came downstairs at about 8.00., hoping to see the girls to thank them for their beguiling act of kindness. I was in luck – one of the girls smiled happily and walked towards me. She quietly told me I could go and take a plate and get some breakfast. Have as much as I want. There's no rush.

I sat next to a Chinese student. We talked about the weather, football; banal things, but we were both glad of the conversation, and I grateful for this thin sliver of normality, this brief connection to a world I felt so excluded from.

Angels of Castlefield – thank you.