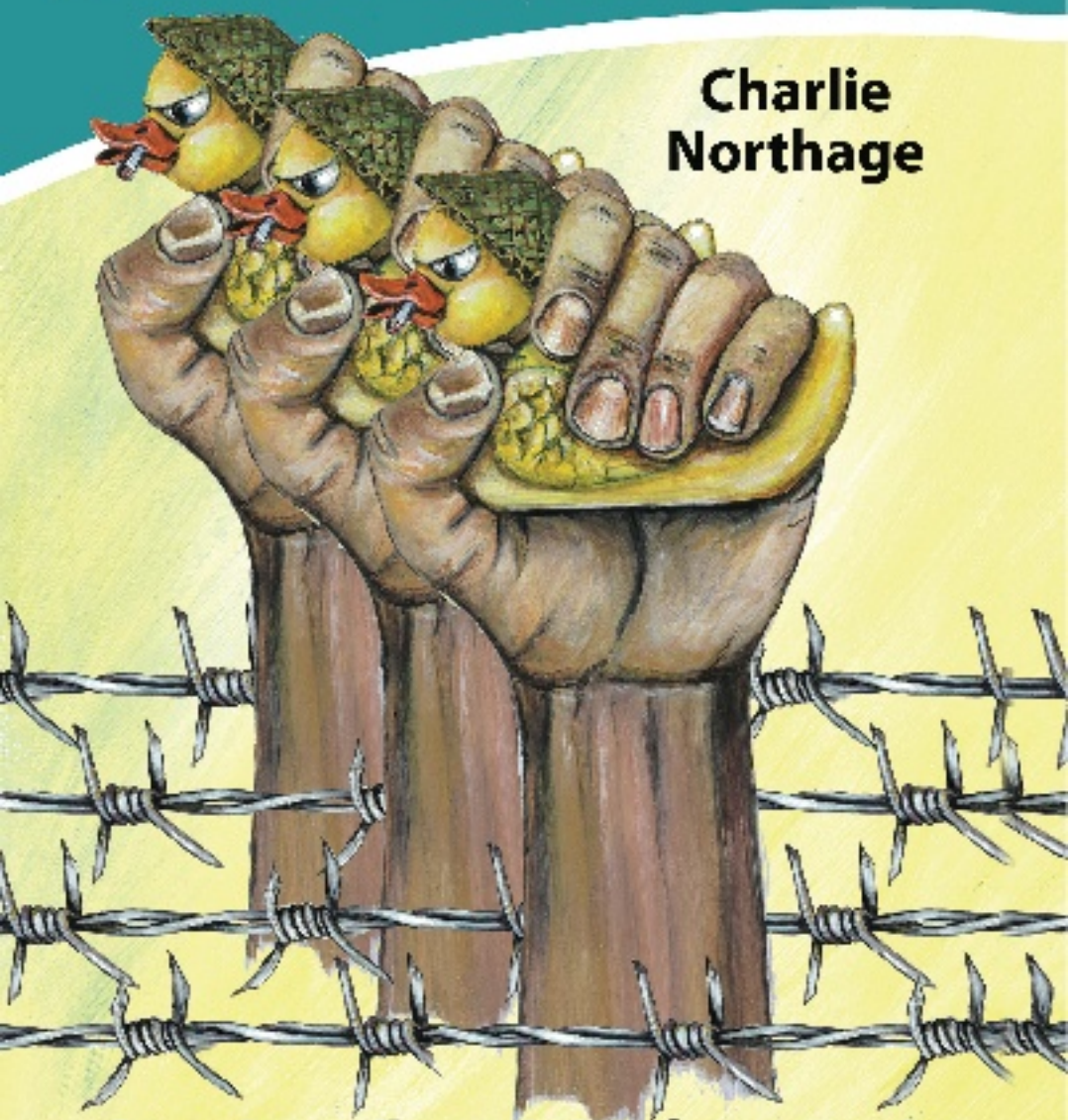
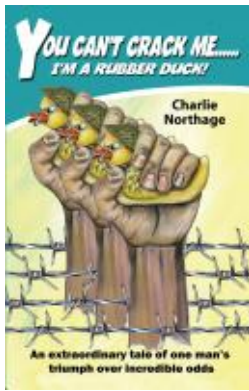


YOU CAN'T CRACK ME..... I'M A RUBBER DUCK!

**Charlie
Northage**



**An extraordinary tale of one man's
triumph over incredible odds**



From a young runaway, sleeping deep within London's urban streets, Charlie Northage served twelve years in the British army. Upon release, his life became a continual struggle against the devastating effects of PTSD. This led to divorce, the loss of his beloved children, alcoholism, and attempted suicide. Without pulling any punches, he reveals himself to us as he is, a human being whom we, if we are honest, can all recognize as akin to ourselves.

You Can't Crack Me... I'm a Rubber Duck

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YOU CAN'T CRACK ME...

I'M A RUBBER DUCK

*An extraordinary tale of one man's triumph
over incredible odds.*

By

Charlie Northage

Edited by Dr. Marian (FirstEditing.com)

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my children, whom I sorely miss, my wonderful Mum, and to my amazing wife. Without her, I would not even be here. People often told me, over many years, that I should write a book. More so in recent times, as I am more 'approachable' now.

Generally, they said this if I'd shared a small story about something that'd happened to me, or one or two of the experiences I've had. Say, for instance, when I ran away to London as a child and slept in 'cardboard box city,' as I call that episode in my life.

Or perhaps when I shared a part of my Army days, tours of duty in Northern Ireland, or that I'd: lost my children, been an alcoholic, attempted suicide, or dealt with the emotional turmoil and immense sadness of having to have my beautiful son adopted.

Either way, I *thank* those wonderful people who, over the years, have pushed me, planted the seed, given me the strength, or encouraged me to write this, my memoir.

I am writing this mainly for my children, family and friends. Of whom I do not have many. The rest have been 'acquaintances.' I have a saying that I used whilst serving in the Army, as I'd seen it in a picture frame in my then Sergeant Major's office. It was hanging on the wall behind his desk. It read "You Can't Crack Me - I'm a Rubber Duck."

I found it really funny at the time, I was about seventeen years old, and came to use it throughout my life as a way of getting through difficult times, circumstances, or obstacles, that I was about to encounter on my life's journey. If you read on you'll discover all about those times, how I managed to

overcome them and why I believed, “You Can’t Crack Me - I’m a Rubber Duck.”

There was a period in my life, which lasted around fourteen years, where my ‘Duck,’ although made of rubber, and therefore couldn’t crack, had finally ‘perished.’ But, I have a new ‘Duck’ now!

I make no apologies for the way in which this book is written. Whether or not it is grammatically correct, or for any expletives I may use. I didn’t attend school very much from age twelve and I *definitely* didn’t attend English Literature! I hated school, as you will find out. I have only ever read four books from cover to cover (At the time of writing).

Then ‘why’ have I written this? Well, I am writing this from the heart. All events are true to the best of my knowledge and belief, and when someone talks (or writes) from the heart, it always translates, as it’s true.

I’ve had a ‘bit of a journey’ in life, and I’d like my family, friends, and **especially** my children to know who I am, how I am still here to tell my story, and what my life has been like whilst being apart from them. If it should be, that others would like to read it, and it gives them some ‘inspiration,’ or gets some people (including my family and friends) to see things from another perspective, then all the better!

I have been faithful to my memory, but I understand that others may remember things differently. I have intended no harm to anyone mentioned in this book.

*All names and places have been changed,
to protect the innocent.*

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THE EARLY YEARS

I find it quite easy to remember back through the years, even back as far as three years old, although my short-term memory right now is a bit hit and miss. I am a visual person and the pictures of my past come flooding back very vividly as I recall events and experiences from my life, which is quite useful when writing this, my memoir.

I'll try to keep to the facts, and the inspiring or emotional things that help it to flow, and not become boring, even though I have limited school education.

I'll start with Christmas 1963. I was three years old then, although I was born in 1959. I received a pedal car from Santa. I was absolutely overjoyed at getting it, because it was exactly what I had dreamed of, and more!

It was red in colour and made of tin I presume. A typical old style, kids pedal car that you might now see occasionally

on the Antiques Road Show. Wow! Was I happy! I couldn't wait to give it a go.

We lived in a two up—two down terraced house in a small town in the North East of England UK. It was a nice friendly sort of place as I remember, and my Mum and Dad seemed quite happy to me at that time. We didn't have a garden, we had a yard, which led out into an entry.

I took my new pedal car out into the entry, and away I went, pushing like mad at the metal pedals, where my feet fitted snugly, and 'bombed off' down the entry. I'll bet my face was a picture, as I was grinning from ear to ear with excitement. In fact, I do have a picture of me in it, and may end up using it for all to see.

After a while I remember needing the loo, probably from all the excitement, like a little puppy when it greets its owner who's been away all day, and has now come home. So I went inside.

On my return, my beautiful little peddle car had been stolen! I can remember to this day the disappointment, sadness, and sheer horror that it had been taken. That was the first of many disappointments and immense sadness that I would experience in the journey of my life.

I recently told a friend about this moment, and his answer was, "what sort of **** would do such a terrible thing to a little boy." He was right of course. At that tender age I thought the world was full of nice people.

Of course it is *not*. It was a very sad way of finding that out. I, of course, went back to being the nice little boy that I was, being brought up by my loving Mum, still totally oblivious to the fact that life was going to become harsh!

You Can't Crack Me... I'm a Rubber Duck

As a child I was always into guns. Something that has followed me throughout my life. Westerns used to be on the TV back then, John Wayne and the like, 'High Chaparral,' 'Busted,' and even 'Kung Fu,' with David Carradine, and I just loved them. As well as 'Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons,' and of course 'Thunderbirds.'

I was 'into' anything that 'shoots.' Water pistols, potato guns, cap guns, little rockets that you could put a 'cap' into, then throw it up in the air, and it went bang when it landed. Pea shooters, I was awesome at them. So accurate, and it gave you a nasty sting if my dried pea hit you! Ha-ha!

I saw a metallic blue kid's rifle, with a wooden stock. It fired a cork out of the end, which was attached by string. It was in a shop window and I really, really wanted it. We passed near that shop on many occasions, and I would hound my Mum so that I could go and see it.

Eventually, Mum bought it for me, and I was over the moon. I never really had it out of my hands, as I didn't want to get it stolen, like my car had been. It did make a bit of noise when the cork flew out of the end of the barrel, but not *that* much.

One day, Dad said I had to go to bed early for whatever reason, and I said "no," as kids do. So he took my rifle off me, and threatened to break it, if I didn't do as I was told. I remember thinking *He won't break my rifle, he's just pretending.* As he knew how much I loved it.

But sure enough, he put it over his knee, as he stood by the bottom of the stairs, and smashed it in half. My word, how I cried. How could he do that to me! It was my pride and joy, and now it was gone. It took ages for me to forgive him!

I had an Uncle Dave, who wasn't really my Uncle, he was my cousin's husband. We just *called* him Uncle. He lived just down the road, and around the corner from us. He took me on my first motorcycle ride. I loved it. I found it so exhilarating and couldn't wait for him to call and take me out for a ride on it again. He also took me for my first 'Dockers Sarnie' as he called it.

This was big, very thick cut slices, of bread and butter, totally jam packed with bacon! In effect, it was just a bacon sandwich, but on a *monster* scale. I was always 'picky' with foods, and Mum had me down at the doctors on many occasions, because I wouldn't eat. Now there I was with Uncle Dave in a Dockers Cafe, eating a Dockers Sarnie. Well impressed!

In 1966 Uncle Dave took me to my very first football match. It just so happened, it was the only year England ever won the World Cup. I can remember it so very clearly. I had never seen that many people in one place before. I was all dressed up, with a scarf and bobble hat, and Uncle Dave had bought me a 'rattle.'

I thought it was cool because it made a loud ratchet sound against the wood, as I swung it around and around, above my head, along with hundreds, or maybe thousands, that also had one.

As we entered the ground, the people, or supporters, where bumping into us, as we struggled to get in amongst the many already there. It was in the 'Stands' then. There were no seats as I recall, just standing room only, but there were tubular bars, in the shape of a goal, placed at regular intervals around the stadium. They were apparently to stop people getting crushed.

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As the match started, the noise level just rose and rose, and it was quite deafening at times. Then at some point in the game, the football was kicked towards the end of the pitch that we were stood. To be able to see the ball, everyone leant forward, as it was down below us. That's when I got crushed against the tubular frame.

As the crowd surged forward to see the ball, the weight of all the people moved us forward, and I was pinned against the rail. Remember, I was only seven years old, and very slight, as I never ate much, and there was no way I could keep myself away from the frame, because of the amount of people behind. I thought I was going to die, and I couldn't breathe! My chest couldn't expand at all, and I started to panic.

Uncle Dave tried his very best to hold me away, and it was only when the ball was kicked back up the pitch, that I managed to get free. I was very frightened of it happening again.

Soon after, my Uncle Dave was killed, on Christmas Day! He was on his way from work, as he'd been doing overtime, to be able to afford Christmas presents for his kids, when his motorcycle hit the brick wall of a cemetery, on a bend. He died instantly. I was distraught, so you can imagine how his kids must have felt, and my poor Aunty, his wife. I have *never* been to a football match since. I missed him greatly for many years.

My sister Mary and I were playing outside one day, as kids did back then. Not stuck in their rooms with computers and video games. We decided we'd climb onto a wall, around the corner from our house. It wasn't a particularly high wall, in fact, it was no more than four feet.

Once we'd gotten on top of it, my sister and I held hands, and I said we'll jump 'after 3,' and started counting, 1, 2, 3, and

I jumped. Notice I said 'I' jumped? Although we were holding each other's hands, and I was totally ok to jump, my sister *wasn't*, and she stayed with her feet firmly planted to the top of the wall.

Before I could let go, I was halfway down, and in the process, pulled Mary off the wall. She landed with a terrible thump, and promptly broke her leg. It made an awful sound, and of course, she started screaming. I ran back home as quickly as I could to get help.

Mum came to the rescue, and took her to hospital to have it x-rayed, and a plaster cast was put on it. My sister blamed me, (as she always did,) and said I'd pushed her, but I *definitely did not*. She was embarrassed at school because of the cast, and to be honest, to this day I don't really think she has ever forgiven me, properly!

A little background may be useful here. My Mum and Dad both worked. My Dad was in the Royal Navy back then, he worked on an Aircraft Carrier as a Steward. He would come home and tell us a few stories, about 'Gib' (Gibraltar) and of some of the 'Yank' officers that he used to be around. I don't honestly remember much else.

He never spent any time with us, us meaning me and my sister Mary, who is 18 months older than me. He certainly didn't do any 'Dad' things with us, although obviously, I didn't know that at the time, he was just Dad. But to be fair, (because I am *definitely* a 'fair' person,) he did teach me how to play chess at age four, and, how to play 'French Cricket.'

My Mum on the other hand was awesome. She worked as a secretary since leaving school, and had a very strong work ethic. She was loyal, punctual and very keen. Looking back, I have no clue as to how she looked after me, my sister, my

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Dad and the house, as well as work as hard, or as long, as she did. We had a black cat called 'Paddy' and a rabbit called 'Whiskey.'

Paddy was a big, pure black tom cat. He was so brazen, he would even ward off dogs when Mum was cleaning the car. I remember once, he was sat on the cooker whilst the gas flame was on, and he never even noticed that his tail was on fire!

Mum threw some water on him and he scarpered. He used to bring birds home that he'd caught, and Mum, or Dad occasionally, would throw a plastic beaker of water on him then too, to get him to drop the bird. I loved Paddy, and he stayed with us for 12 years of my life.

When I was five years old we moved house, the first move of very many in my life. It was still in the same town, but a nicer area, much better than the old place, a three bedroom semi-detached on a corner plot. It had a bigger back yard, and a small garden to the front, lined by a privet hedge.

My Gran and Granddad only lived a few doors down, on the opposite side of the road. In a similar house, just one house in from a corner. My Auntie Pauline, Uncle John and Auntie Jane also lived very close.

In this new house, (I've just realised that I call it a house - not a 'home') my Dad had left the Navy, and was working at an Industrial Plant, after spending months lounging around the house in his dressing gown, unemployed. It's hard adjusting to 'civi street' after military service.

Mum was still working as a secretary. Dad wouldn't let us in the front room, this was his room, and he even put a 'hook and eye' at the very top of the door, so that Mary and I couldn't

reach it, to stop us from entering. Mum was not amused, and tried on many occasion to get him to take it off, but to no avail.

You see, he kept *his* things in there, *his* chess set, that he polished and adored. *His* record player, that was always immaculate, and hardly ever used, and a lovely - I think oak - ashtray stand, that he'd bought from an antique dealer.

It was definitely *his* room, and no way, were we allowed in there, except on the odd occasion when he wanted a game of chess; even then, he made sure I held the pieces 'correctly.'

I had a bicycle that my parents bought me, new. It was a 'racer' with 'drop' handlebars, and I thought it was great. Dad borrowed it one day, "to do shopping," he said, and when he brought it back, the front wheel was buckled. It never felt the same again.

The bonus of living there though, was Gran and Granddad were just down the road, and my sister and I spent a lot of our time there. Gran and Granddad where on my mother's side. More friendly, loving, caring people, you could not wish to meet.

My Great Grandmother lived there too, until she later died, at the grand old age of 94. Also present was Aunt Ella, who had a 'big shoe,' as I saw it as a kid.

In fact, she had one leg shorter than the other, and always drank 'stout.' Her husband was forever spitting into rolled up newspaper, and throwing it into the open, coal fire. I had no clue then as to why, but I now know he had bronchitis.

Gran always had a cigarette hanging from her mouth. I remember the brand was Players No6. She was so lovely and caring, and spent most of the time in her small kitchen,

cooking us homely, healthy meals. I especially liked it when she did homemade rice pudding. Couldn't stand semolina pudding, but I did like the Tapioca one. :)

Granddad was also a lovely man. He was an Inspector on the buses and was always smart when he went to work. I remember him brushing his peaked hat, in a certain circular motion, and it was a nice reminder, when I eventually did the same with my Army hat. Granddad was the 'role model' in my life, I learned more from him, than any other male at that time.

He used the whole of his 'box room' to build a 'Scaletrix' set for me! He'd done everything, from miniature trees and bushes, to mountains on the back wall, and even fake grass, as well as traffic lights. He'd bought quite a few different cars, from different eras, and I was made up spending time with him. I used to make my cars go so fast, they were always spinning off the track!

There was a park at the bottom of our road that I used to frequent. It had a lake, with a small island in the middle, swings, an art gallery, bowling greens and a cricket field with a pavilion. There were quite a few Park Keepers then too. I used to have run-ins with them, and was chased on numerous occasions. I was a little terror, starting fires, setting off fireworks, or throwing stones etc.

Looking back, I was definitely a 'nuisance,' but really, I was just being a lad growing up. I wasn't the devil. Kids do these things, right? But I did used to shout "who's that twat with the big black hat? Parkie, Parkie," whilst they were chasing me!

I hid from a Parkie chasing me one day, by getting myself under the cricket pavilion. There was no way any grown-up could get under there! There was only just enough clearance

for *me* to get under, and even then, had to 'suck' my chest in to manage it.

Whilst I was lying still, on my back, waiting for the Parkie to pass, I noticed that, the underneath of the pavilion had rotted in places, and I could actually see through, to the rooms inside. So I clambered in through the rotten floor, and to my surprise, there were loads of cricket gear, including brand new bats. To a kid, that's like Christmas!

I knew right from wrong, but, a brand new cricket bat, was too much temptation. So I stole one. A couple of my mates used to play cricket with me, and after we'd finished, we'd hide the bat, back underneath the pavilion.

We couldn't take it home, as our parents would ask where we'd got it from. Sometime later, when we went to get the bat for a game of cricket, it wasn't there. Someone else had stolen it from *us*. What goes around, comes around, I suppose.

It was around that time that I also learned to play the Clarinet at school, and used to perform 'Strangers on the Shore' by Aka Bilk, at our relatives' houses. I also played at the Philharmonic Hall; and learned how to play guitar too, from a neighbour that had two fingers missing.

One day while I was climbing trees in the park, I put my foot on a rotten branch. It snapped instantly, and I fell, from quite a height. Surrounding the Park was a six-foot-high fence. As I fell from the tree, I tried to grab the fence to break my fall, but unfortunately, I miss-timed it, and my hand got caught.

With my body weight and gravity, I continued to fall and instantly broke my wrist. In fact, it'd been wrenched from its socket. It was very painful to say the least, and when I got to

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the hospital, and they'd x-rayed it, I remember them telling me, "never break it again," as it couldn't be repaired.

I got a plaster cast put on it, and my sister Mary was quite amused I reckon, as it 'served me right' because I'd broken *her* leg. After the cast was taken off, I noticed that the wrist bone, which normally sits on top, to one side, was actually protruding from the side of my wrist, and not on top.

So far though, it has served me well, and if anything, I have found it to be stronger than my other wrist. Needless to say, I haven't broken it again since, either.

Another time while at the same Park, I found someone's wallet on the cricket field. It had a couple of photographs in it, an ID of some description, and some money. I didn't keep any of it, and I promptly went to the nearest police station to hand it in. I mention this, so that you can see, I'm not *all* bad. Although I did think I might get a reward, if I'm honest. Ha-ha. I didn't though.

When I was about ten years old, I used to look a lot older, and was able to buy fireworks from the local shop at the bottom of our road. It was a regular occurrence to play with fireworks, and I especially liked the 'bangers.' Sometimes I'd go down to the lake in the park, light a banger, then put it on the water.

As the banger was 'fizzing,' it would 'bomb off' along the water, and then go BANG, with the water splashing up. As a kid, I thought this was highly amusing. One day, while messing about, I came across a wasp's nest in the bushes, behind a path which went around the lake. I thought "I know, I'll put a banger inside their nest, and blow them all up." Bad move!

When I lit the banger, and dropped it into their nest, of course they all flew out, very aggressively. I'd obviously killed some of them, or at least knocked them out, but this huge one, flew out from the nest. I can assure you that I'd never seen a wasp this big! I presume it would've been the 'queen wasp,' and it flew straight at me.

As I started to run away, it got me, and landed on my left leg, on the inside, about 4" up from my ankle. It stung like hell. I hit it a couple of times with my hand, but it was just stuck there, arching its back, and giving all it had to make sure I learned my lesson.

Eventually I ran to the lake and put my leg into the water thinking, "That will get it off," but no. It just carried on stinging me, still arching its back, as it dug even deeper into my skin.

I noticed a small twig by the side of me, picked it up, and eventually managed to push the wasp off with it, and the wasp fell into the water. It left a scar, about the size of a large baked bean, on my leg as a reminder. You could still see it, even when I was forty years old, but it has faded now, and been covered by a tattoo.

Still messing around with fireworks, I used to place 'rockets' into the exhaust pipes of cars. When you lit them, instead of going up into the air, they would fly straight down the street. Proper cool. Then I saw an older lad making a 'genie' one day.

This was done by breaking a banger apart, putting the contents, i.e., gunpowder, onto the floor, and setting it alight with a match. The resulting ignition, would cause an immediate, large puff of smoke, going up into the air. Hence the name 'genie.'

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At ten years old, I was fascinated by this, and wanted to see *exactly* how that worked. So I got myself a 'smartie' tube. A regular kid's sweets, 'smarties' tube, broke the banger in half, and poured the gunpowder from the banger inside the tube.

It was standing upright like a rocket on the pavement, and I was feeling very excited at what I was about to witness. Watching closely, as I peered down the smartie tube, I dropped a lit match inside. For a very brief moment, I could see the match-head, as it was still igniting the Sulphur coating, then, WHOOSH!! Everything ignited.

Because I'd used a smartie tube, it had acted like the barrel of a gun! All the force and energy of the gunpowder igniting, was directed with pin-point accuracy, to my eye that was looking down the 'barrel' of the smartie tube! I thought I was blind.

I screamed, because it hurt so much, and I couldn't see. I'd lost my eyebrow and eyelashes from my left eye too. I ran home crying, and showed Mum what I'd done. She immediately took me to hospital, as I couldn't see anything at all from that eye.

The nursing staff at the hospital were great with us, and I had to have coloured drops put into my eye, that stung like hell. When they peered into my eye, with *that* light, they told me I had bits of gunpowder buried into the eyeball, which needed removing. Painful to say the least, even though the coloured drops had some form of anaesthesia in them.

So with an eye patch, that made me look cool, like a pirate, off I went, back home, and then school. I couldn't see for a few weeks, but eventually my sight returned. Although it

left me with a stigmatism. Personally, I think that was a bit of 'Karma,' for what I had done to those wasps!

I was always good at throwing, and was very accurate. In school, I could easily throw a tennis ball, from one end of the playground to the other, which the other kids found difficult. When winter came and it snowed, I used to make snowballs, in the alleyway, at the side of Gran's house. It looked like a load of cannon balls, piled up high, in a pyramid shape, like something off a Galleon.

But these weren't ordinary snowballs, they were different. I had put a stone inside each and every one of them, then waited for them to turn to ice, for maximum effect. Nobody was going to beat me in a snowball fight.

I also used to make 'gypsy darts,' using a small cane, the type you would use to tie a small plant to, to help it stay upright. I'd make one end into a point, with my penknife, then cut a slot at the other end, to slide a couple of playing cards into. This made the 'dart' shape.

Then I wound some string around it, to help with distance and spin when throwing it. These 'gypsy darts' were lethal. They would easily pierce skin, muscle, and even bone. If you threw them high enough, they would stick into the tarmac on landing! Brilliant!

Other things we used to do back then, was play 'split the kipper.' Standing on grass, with your feet about a yard apart, your opponent would throw a knife, somewhere in-between your legs, and wherever it landed, you would have to move one of your feet, to that mark. This made the gap between your feet smaller, on every throw, until you lost your nerve, and the opponent would win.

You Can't Crack Me... I'm a Rubber Duck

I was great at that game, because I was so accurate, and my hand-eye co-ordination was brilliant. We progressed from that, to shooting the backs of our legs, with air rifles! Whoever could stand, and take the most pellets fired into the back of the leg, would win!

I'd often take small darts to school with me too. They were like the fairground darts, only a lot smaller, you can still buy them in some sports shops today, and I would throw them into the math teacher's tweed jacket, when he was writing on the blackboard.

I would also take a 'Gat' pistol with me sometimes, and would fire tiny pointed darts across the classroom at things, as well as letting bangers off inside my desk!

I got the 'cane' quite a lot, as I'm sure you can imagine, and I remember the Geography teacher using a 'Malaysian Cane' on my hand to deter me. That cane had notches, about every inch along the length of it. I'd go home with my hands black and blue from that one! Ha-ha.

In the evenings, I would go out and play with my mates, and we'd get up to all kinds of stuff, especially 'ropeys,' as we called them. That was a rope, tied to a tree, and we would swing out on it across a brook, stream, or lake. We'd also go collecting newts, frogs, and toads, and I'd fire my pea shooter through open bedroom windows, on the houses nearby.

There was a big 'rock,' made of sandstone I think, called the 'Grandfather Rock.' it was in the middle of a heath, and we'd have races to see who could reach the top first. I was with a mate of mine when he called home one day, because he needed the loo.

As he pushed against the back door of his house, his arm went straight through the big glass window. He ripped his arm to shreds on the glass, and was bleeding profusely. That was the first time I'd seen that amount of blood, but it wouldn't be my last. All these 'experiences' served me well, later in life, when I joined the Army.

Nan and Granddad, from my Dad's side, were also lovely people. Granddad was in the First World War. He wouldn't serve in the 2nd World War, as he was a 'conscientious objector.' He worked in the Post Office until his retirement.

Whilst in the trenches, he had had a grappling hook land in his leg. It later caused gangrene, from an infection in his big toe, and he had to have his leg amputated above the knee, so as to prevent the gangrene from spreading.

I remember he used to get me to kick his tin leg, and I always wondered how it never hurt him, because I really *did* kick it hard. Unfortunately, the gangrene eventually spread, and he went into hospital to have his other leg amputated, but it was too late. The gangrene had gone to his brain and he passed away. His was the very first funeral that I ever attended.

My Mum never wanted me to go, as she believed, I would say rightly, that I was too young at the age of 7. It was very traumatic for me, as I loved my Granddad dearly, and the hymn Amazing Grace still acts as a reminder of that day, almost fifty years on.

His wife, my Nan, was distraught. They'd been childhood sweethearts; she was a 'Lancashire Lass' who made the best chips I've ever tasted!! She said the secret, was to use only Lard, and no basket in the pan. You should stir them with a spoon that has holes. This action would have the effect of

'scraping' the outside of the chips, making them more 'crispy.' Perhaps you'd like to give it a go? Chips are great!

Nan used to wear a lovely crucifix around her neck, and would hold it every time she thought of Granddad. She said that he had told her, before he died, that she shouldn't worry, as he was going to build her a house in heaven, and once complete, he would call for her, and she would join him.

I have absolutely no clue, as to whether or not this statement is true—and neither do you, or anyone else—but it's definitely a lovely thing to hear and believe in, when a loved one passes away, and can certainly do no harm. Unlike a suicide bomber, and *his* or *her* belief, in these modern times!

My Nan ended up in hospital whilst I was away serving my country, in H.M. Forces Germany. However, I did manage to see her once, when I came home on leave. I had turned up at the hospital and she was overjoyed, and very proud to see me. She always said I should join the Army.

I told the nursing staff that I was taking her out for the day. They said, "You can't do that," but I was not taking "*no*" for an answer, and promptly brought a wheel chair over by the bed. She'd had a stroke and couldn't talk, just some moans and mumbles, but her face said everything.

It was so obvious that she wanted to go with me. I lifted her out of the bed and into the wheelchair, then managed, with the help of a porter, to get her into the front seat of my Ford Capri.

If you've seen that type of car before, you will know that it's quite low to the ground, but has good legroom at the front. She seemed really happy to be with me, and out in the fresh air, away from the hospital surrounds.

As we were driving it started to rain, and her face lit up like a Christmas tree, as she hadn't seen any rain for months, bless her. I will never forget her face on that day. We had a nice drive, and managed to see some relatives of ours, who lived in a lovely sandstone cottage. More about them later.

It was the last time I ever saw my Nan alive, and to this day, I will never regret spending that precious time alone with her. It was meant to be.

You Can't Crack Me... I'm a Rubber Duck



Gran, Granddad, Mary, Mum & Me at Butlins



Gran & Granddad

Charlie Northage



Me & Mary



LONDON AND STUFF

My parents decided to separate when I was about 11 years old. It's hardly surprising looking back, as they were not really suited. My sister left with Mum and I stayed with Dad. The *only* reason I stayed with Dad, and never left with Mum, is that it seemed fair to me, as a child, that they should have one each. (I told you I was fair.)

Dad didn't have a clue how to look after me, because he never had. So, after a while, a couple of weeks, I think, I went to stay with Mum, who'd gotten herself a house in another place, about ten miles away. It was a nice house, with a garden front and back, a greenhouse, and a wooden garden shed. It was whilst at this house that things took a turn.

Mum later decided, as most married people I've met do, to give their marriage another try. So Dad came to live with us again. One day he was in a bad mood, which was often the case, and Mum rang, saying she had to go for a business

meeting with her boss, at a particular Restaurant. Dad didn't like this one bit, and started ranting on about stuff.

Later that evening, Mum rang again, to apologise for being so late, and to let him know that it was going to be even longer than she thought, and gave him the telephone number of the Restaurant, to reassure him that things were ok.

He paid no attention whatsoever to what Mum had said, and my sister and I were getting very nervous, as he'd started drinking a bottle of Navy Rum. Now, my Dad may be many things, but a drinker he was not, which means he got very drunk, very quickly.

He grabbed an apple from the dish on the table, then said to my sister and me, "this is what's going to happen to your Mum when she gets in!" And with one hand, he crushed the apple! Not an easy feat. I would guess he weighed about twenty stone then.

As you can imagine, my sister and I were so frightened, and I was even more scared for Mum. "What will he do when she gets home?" I remember thinking to myself, and, "I need to warn her," was uppermost in my mind. At age 11, I was going to have to be brave!

So I went upstairs to my bedroom, which looked out over the driveway, at the front of the house, and waited. I thought, "Yes, this is it, I can shout to her from here, and tell her not to come into the house, as Dad is drunk."

It got late, and I fell asleep! I awoke to my Mum's screams, as my Dad was hitting her, in the hallway downstairs. Dressed only in my underpants, I ran down the stairs, and saw my Father strangling my Mum! He was towering over her, with

his arms outstretched, and my Mum was slumped against the wall. I shouted at him to STOP, but it fell on deaf ears.

So I ran into the kitchen, grabbed a bread knife, went back into the hallway, and threw it at him. I had no other thoughts in my head, other than to stop this man, my Dad, from killing my Mum.

Fortunately, the knife missed, and landed in the front door. It was enough for my Dad to stop what he was doing though, momentarily. With fear in my heart, that he'd now come after me for throwing the knife, I ran outside.

It was cold, and dark, and I had nothing on my feet, I still had only my underpants on. I remembered there was a phone box in the village, so I started running, to call the police.

To get to the phone box, I had to run across a piece of unused land, there are houses built on it now, but back then, it had bushes, trees and definitely nettles! I got stung around my ankles and lower legs, but I didn't care, or even notice at the time, as my *mission* was to save Mum by getting to that phone box.

I dialled 999 and told them, my Mum and sister were in danger, and what had happened, and they said they'd send someone right away. They did in those days!

I ran back home worried for Mum and my sister. On arriving at the house, they'd both gone, which I felt relieved about, but my Dad was still angry. I told him the police were on their way, got dressed quick, and ran back outside. I didn't feel safe in the house with him.

When the police arrived, I went back in with them. They had 'words' with Dad, then my Granddad arrived, to take me to

Grans house, as that's where Mum and my sister had gone. Needless to say, Mum kicked Dad out for good after that, and they got divorced sometime later.

It was around this time that I *changed*. I was certainly unruly to say the least. My sister and I grew closer, but I was being a bit of a handful for Mum. I got air rifles, and 'sagged' off school.

I threw eggs at the neighbours, who complained to my poor Mum, and I would put baking soda and vinegar into an 'Andrews Liver Salts' tin, shake it, and watch the lid fly off. It went so high in the air, that it would clear the roof of the house.

I was hanging around with some bad lads then, too, and one evening, I went with a lad to burgle a house! It never felt 'right,' and I have never done it again. Entering someone else's property, and stealing their belongings, is a dreadful thing. I do regret that, and felt so sorry for the owners of the property.

We also stole a Ford Cortina, and went for a ride into the city. We got stuck in a 'bus lane' and had to mount a large concrete barrier, so as to get out of the way. We took it straight back to where we'd found it, though.

I realised, that while I was hanging around with the 'bad lads,' I was under 'peer pressure' from them. I thought I *had* to do certain things, to be 'accepted,' or be part of the 'norm.' I soon stopped listening to others, and just did 'my own thing.' If it doesn't 'feel' right to you, then don't do it, especially not for the amusement or satisfaction of others.

My Auntie Pauline had done her own thing. She took herself off to America when she was young, and all alone. She travelled all over the States, selling her blood for money, as

she moved from job to job. I have always respected and looked up to her for that.

She certainly wouldn't bow to any 'peer pressure!' She wrote a book about her journeys, too. She has been my inspiration on many occasions. What a strong woman, as is my Mum.

A nice friend of mine at the time, was a guy called John. We'd hang around at his parents' house, generally taking his Collie dog for walks. It looked like 'Lassie' from the TV series. His Dad had a couple of motorbikes in the garage, and we'd occasionally ride up and down the street on them. My sister Mary, really fancied John, but nothing ever happened, as she was with Martin. More about him later.

I read in a newspaper not long ago that John was found hanged at his business premises, leaving his wife and children behind. What a shame, and such a nice bloke. Another lad was always asking me for a fight. When we'd get off the school bus, we would lay into each other, and crowds gathered to watch.

We even arranged a big 'scrap' on the village green one night, and tore into each other, and I'd got a 'special' pair of boots, called 'Nebbs' (North End Boot Boys). Neither of us wanted to give in, and months later we agreed to call it 'Even Stevens' and became friends.

Around this time, I went into a large store in the centre of town, to get myself a new pair of trousers. Mum had given me some 'dosh' to get them. My theory, though, was that if I could 'nick' a pair, I would be able to use the money for sweets and cigarettes, and she would never know. So, in this store, I took about four or five pairs of trousers into the changing rooms with me.

They didn't give you a 'tag' to say how many items you'd taken into the changing room in those days, so perhaps it was me that started it! Ha-ha. Anyway, I put the new pair of trousers I wanted, on, then put my old pair of trousers over them, put the others back on the rail and walked out of the store!

Get in! I'd not been caught, and had a new pair of trousers, plus, the money that Mum had given me. Result. Feeling a bit 'cocky,' I walked into a 'Boots' store. There, I found a tiny mouth organ on a keyring, and, it actually made sounds when you blew into it. Thinking, it would be easy to put that in my pocket, I did so, and as I walked out of the store, I was stopped by two store detectives that'd spotted me!

Now, because I knew that I was also wearing a pair of 'knocked off' trousers, as well as the key ring, I was shitting myself, thinking I was going to get 'done' for those as well. They never searched me, though, and I ended up getting two years' probation for stealing the key ring! Not such a good result after all. **Another learning!**

The Probation Officer was a great guy, and I learned such a lot from him and was able to chat with him about all kinds of things. He tried his best to get me to go to school, but he was fighting a losing battle there! Mostly, we ended up sitting on the sea front eating fish and chips and throwing pebbles into the sea. He did visit me at home, though, and Mum thought he was doing a great job.

One day, while Mum was washing up, she jokingly flicked her hands, and sprayed some water at me. It was like a red rag to a bull. I got so angry at her, as I felt humiliated, and I picked up a kitchen chair, swung it behind my head, and got ready to throw it at her! Something deep inside me, said 'NO!' I

threw the chair to the ground, and ran out of the house the back way.

I leapt across the neighbours' fences like a gazelle, and ended up in the local school field. I lay silent for a while. I knew Mum would have to go to work shortly, and I could go back home. So I waited. As I was waiting, quietly, I realised what I'd just done. How could I do such a thing, to my lovely Mum, who had just been through so much! The guilt I felt, was overwhelming!

Without thinking, (a common trait of mine,) I ran home, and thought, "I know, I'll run away." I needed money - and fast. We had an old rented TV at the time that we put 50 pence piece's into to make it work. It was locked of course, but that didn't stop me.

I picked the lock using a picture hook that I hammered flat. It worked a treat, and I stole the money that was in there, not giving a second thought that Mum would have to pay it back. I packed some clothes in a suitcase, then looked in my sister's room, to see what I could take to the pawn shop, as I knew I'd need some more cash.

The only two things I could see, that may be of some worth, was a typewriter and her precious guitar. I really didn't want to have to take her guitar, as I knew how much it meant to her, but the overriding factor, was that I had to escape.

So I put the typewriter inside the suitcase, and off I went, 'with suitcase and guitar in hand,' like the Simon & Garfunkel song 'Homeward Bound,' but I was actually running away from home - to London.

I managed to sell the typewriter, and guitar, then took a coach to London. I'm sure, if I recall correctly, it only cost me

£5.00 back then. I arrived late at night, around 2am, in Kings Cross Station. It was strange, and I felt nervous and excited, all at the same time. There was hustle and bustle everywhere, even at that time of the morning.

It seems London is indeed, a city that never sleeps, even in those days, almost half a century ago! My word how time flies, it really doesn't seem that long ago to me. I noticed an empty bench, so put my case down by the side of me, realising that the case was going to slow me down, and become a problem. No wonder I have always 'travelled light' ever since.

I sat, and stared at everything that was going on, watching all the different people, feeling hungry and afraid by now. What was I going to do? Where was I going to sleep? It was then, that I noticed someone getting something from a machine, off to my right.

As I walked across, I could see a picture on the front of the machine, a cup, with chips sticking out of it. I remember thinking, *What? a chip machine?* And it was. For a shilling, you could get a cup of chips, from a machine! Brilliant, I thought, that's food sorted, I love chips.

To this day I've never seen another chip machine, in this country or abroad. Apparently they were first introduced in 1967, and cost 2x six pence pieces.

Food sorted, and a bench to sleep on, I just needed to keep my suitcase safe, so I tied my belt around the handle, and attached it to me. Sleeping was scary to me, I was 13 now, a teenager, "What have I done?"

As it got light, I started to walk around the streets of London, (another song,) taking in the sights, sounds, colours,

and smells of life around me, still holding tightly onto my suitcase.

I *had* to do something about that, so I went back to Kings Cross Station, and asked if I could leave my suitcase in the left-luggage department. The answer, was a firm "NO."

I tried on numerous occasions, over the next week to leave my suitcase somewhere, at train stations, undergrounds, and bus terminals; but no-one wanted anything to do with me. There were terrorist threats from the IRA at that time.

I was sleeping rough in doorways, the back of shops, and anywhere I felt reasonably safe, given the circumstances. The local launderette used to keep me warm during the day, and into early evening sometimes, if I wasn't booted out.

Money was tight, but I needed a good night's sleep. I found it totally exhausting, sleeping with one eye open, and listening to every sound. (It always reminds me of those days, when our cat's ears move, independently, while sleeping). The only warmth came from a few cardboard boxes that I'd stolen from the back of a shop.

One night, I was so cold and tired, I went to a bed and breakfast establishment, somewhere near Regents Park. It wasn't that nice, but it was warm, and safe. The woman running the place was a bit sceptical when I said I was down there visiting an aunt.

I had to put coins in the electric meter too. Feeling refreshed, the next day I walked for miles, and ended up by a main road to 'hitch' a ride. When asked where I was going, I said, "Dover."

The next car to stop for me, was a lovely couple, who were on their way to Canterbury. They didn't ask too many questions, but I told them I was on my way to visit an aunt, in France! Not very imaginative, I agree, but I was just a naive teenager then.

When we arrived in Canterbury they dropped me at the coach station. It was nowhere near as big as King's Cross Station, and had less amenities. It definitely didn't have a chip machine! What was I going to do?

Eventually, I found a local fish and chip shop, so food sorted, I then found the local launderette and was now warm. Around 8pm they kicked me out, as they were closing, so I ended up in the back of a co-op store, sleeping on cardboard boxes again. There were plenty, as no-one recycled things back then.

During the night, I went out looking for food, and came across a chocolate machine. I needed sweets. They used to have plenty of sweet machines in those days, and I can recall wanting a 'Tiffin' bar. It's chocolate, with raisins and bits of biscuit in it. I always had a sweet tooth, and still have to this day.

Whilst walking along, looking inside parked cars, in case I saw any money, or loose change, I came across one that had a handbag lying on the back seat. I didn't want to steal it, as I was brought up knowing right from wrong, but this was survival.

So I smashed the window, and ran off down the road with the handbag, back to the safety of my cardboard boxes, at the back of the co-op. There was quite a bit of money in there, and I felt relieved, to be honest, at least I wasn't going to starve.

People in Canterbury seemed to be looking at me strangely, and I feared I may be caught. *Perhaps I would be better off back in London?* So, because of the money I now had from the stolen handbag, I took a coach back there. It wasn't long after that I was picked up by the police.

I was still asking if I could leave my suitcase at places, and because of National Security, someone reported me as being suspicious, or at least, trying to off-load a suspicious package. I had entered a newsagent, and asked for a notepad and pen, as I wanted to write home to my sister, when two plain clothes policemen walked in, and arrested me!

They took me to the local 'nick' and placed me in a cell. After a while, they 'interviewed' me, and told me why I had been arrested, (the suitcase) and asked why I was in London. I'd been asked that many times by then, so, "to see my aunty" was my swift reply. "Where does she live?" they asked.

Oh no! I knew only one street that I could instantly recall, so my answer was "Fleet Street." Little did I know, that that was a particularly well known street that housed most, if not all, of the National Newspapers! As a cheeky little sod, when asked my name, I said "Mary Jane." And when asked where I lived, I said "down a grid."

They promptly threw me back in the cell and gave me a good hiding. Back then it was deemed 'ok' to do that to a child. Nowadays, it'd be seen as 'child abuse.' By the way, I have no qualms about what they did, as it taught me a valuable lesson, and, needless to say, they got the truth from me afterwards.

Mum and Granddad were informed that I was being held at the Police Station, and they had to travel all the way from the North of England to London by car, to collect me. That was a considerable journey in those days. Both of them were giving

me the 'silent treatment,' all the way home, and had locked the car doors, so as I couldn't run away again.

We stopped at a Motorway Service Station halfway home as I need the loo, and Granddad 'kept guard' outside while I went. The 'homecoming' was quite a relief, as everything, and everyone, was familiar. It was great to see my sister again, but I obviously had some apologising to do, especially about her guitar!

After the London episode, I had to return to school, I didn't like that. I could hear all the whispering in the corridors, the classrooms, and the playground. "Look, that's that kid who ran away to London," I could hear them say. I felt like I was 'different' to all the other kids, and to be honest, I didn't like the attention.

On the way home, by school bus I was sitting on my own blowing smoke rings against the window, when I noticed a nice pretty girl staring at me. She asked if she could come and sit next to me, and of course, I said 'yes.' Not just because she was a pretty girl, but because then, I wouldn't feel so isolated, and alone.

Her first words were "You're the boy who ran away to London aren't you?" I thought *Oh, here we go*, but actually, she was impressed, and wanted to hear all about it. She could tell I was different from the rest of the lads. Her name was Julie, and she became my first love.

Julie was absolutely lovely, I had my first proper kiss with her the next day, when we met after school. It was in the archway of a Methodist Church gate. Over time, I met her family, her parents were also divorced, and she lived with her Mum and Brother, who was away in the Army. I got on great with her Mum, and she allowed me to stay over if I wanted.

Unfortunately, Julie had some problems, which I found out later on in our relationship. If we argued about something, she'd literally 'flip out.' Sometimes she'd even get a bread knife from the kitchen and threaten to slash her wrists, in front of her Mum, not just when I was alone with her.

I remember one day; we were waiting in a bus shelter. It was all enclosed, apart from the openings for entry and exit. Inside, the walls had small pebbles stuck in cement. This was *not* pebbledash, it was actual pebbles, like you would find on a beach. Anyway, we had a bit of an argument, and I said I was leaving her.

All of a sudden, she started banging her head against the pebbles! So hard in fact, that her head was bleeding and you could clearly see the indentations of the pebbles on her forehead. Certainly, this wasn't 'normal' behaviour. Episodes similar to this happened quite frequently, over the time we were together, and it was still happening when I joined the Army as a boy soldier, at 16 years of age.

We did spend a night out together. I mean all night. She seemed fascinated that I'd run away and slept in cardboard boxes, so one night, we 'pretended' to run away, and went to a park about six miles away. It was night-time, and we climbed over the six-foot fence, into the Bowling Green. There were a couple of benches, and a bit of a shelter, so we had some cover from the elements.

We collected some boxes that we found in the allotments nearby, and spent the night, huddled together, and looking at the stars. It was quite magical, looking back, and I remember us talking about running away to 'Gretna Green' in Scotland, to get married. When we reached sixteen, of course.

After a time communicating with her, whilst I was away in the Army, I realised that I couldn't carry on with the relationship, so we ended it amicably, when I came home on leave a few months later. I still thought a lot about her, as she was a lovely girl, I just didn't know how to deal with her behaviour.

She became a nurse, and by all accounts, was very good at her job. It was many years later, I think around 1996, I read an article in the local paper that she'd died aged 36, from a brain tumour! It came as quite a shock.

I can still feel the sadness as I write, and it did explain her behaviour when we were together. It was a sad day indeed that she should lose her life so young, and that she'd been plagued by the tumour for all those years of her life. Bless her. My first Love.

Although I was a 'stropky teenager.' I was 'up for' working, and had a 'paper round,' with the local Newsagent, and also a 'milk round' with the local Milkman. I would get up early, around 4 a.m., and go to deliver milk first. The guy who drove the van, also owned the business, and he was a right 'stickler.'

We had to load the crates of milk, and some other items, like orange juice, into the van first thing, then off we'd go around the houses and businesses. He would sit in the driver's seat and shout "two on the left, three on the right" as he drove slowly down the road.

He would also shout "two gold tops on the right and three blue tops next door" and so on, until the whole van was empty. We'd return to the 'depot.' which was actually a big garage, to replenish, and off we'd go again until the 'round' was

completed. Then I'd run home, get my bike, and bomb off to do the paper round.

One day whilst delivering milk, I was told "two on the right and three next door." So to save a bit of time, decided to jump over the fence that was separating the two houses, instead of running back down the path and up next door's path. A bad move, when you're carrying three pints of milk in one hand!

As I jumped, I caught the tip of my foot on the top of the fence, and went flying! Of course, the milk bottles smashed all over the place, and as I placed my hand out to break the fall, I cut my finger on the broken glass.

There was blood everywhere, but at first, I didn't even notice, because I was too busy panicking about smashing the milk bottles. I thought I'd be in the shit with the boss. But he'd noticed the blood pouring from my hand, and he was more concerned about that.

That's when I noticed, and felt ill all of a sudden, as I could see the bone in my little finger! I got it bandaged up, carried on with the rest of the milk round, then on to the paper round. I still have the scar as a reminder.

Some mornings, in the early hours, my friend Martin and I, would meet up to go shooting. It was always dark, certainly before dawn, as we wanted to shoot rabbits. We met at a telephone box, then walked through a cemetery to the park, on the opposite side.

One morning as we entered the cemetery, it felt as though something was 'pushing' us back, towards the gates behind us. We had to lean forward as if against a strong wind, to keep moving. As we approached the exit, the opposite happened,

and it was as if that 'strange force,' was now pushing us out of the gates on the other side.

It was a really weird, unusual, and spooky thing. I never felt it again, then, or since, but it certainly gave me goose bumps, especially later on when I watched 'The Exorcist.' But I loved the early mornings, and hearing the 'dawn chorus.' It's heavenly!

You Can't Crack Me... I'm a Rubber Duck

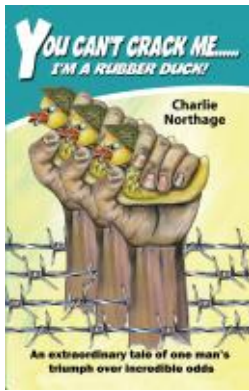


Mary & Me

Charlie Northage



Mary, Mum & Me



From a young runaway, sleeping deep within London's urban streets, Charlie Northage served twelve years in the British army. Upon release, his life became a continual struggle against the devastating effects of PTSD. This led to divorce, the loss of his beloved children, alcoholism, and attempted suicide. Without pulling any punches, he reveals himself to us as he is, a human being whom we, if we are honest, can all recognize as akin to ourselves.

You Can't Crack Me... I'm a Rubber Duck

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