

You Have My Ear

I was brought up very strict. Presbyterian strict. Almost daily church activities became part of the amalgam of who you were then. You're unaware of any other way of being. But teenage years bring change. It can go any way. The eldest gets it hardest, I say. No sibling examples to follow, or scoot around.

I was going to church two to three times on Sundays then. At the church's Boys Brigade and youth club four times a week. Enjoying most of it: camping out on the Antrim Hills in summer, weekends away, helping out on social schemes, a winter full of activities and a Saturday evening trip to an indoor pool in Portrush.



A still from the film that accompanied the release of A Whiter Shade of Pale

On Sundays wearing a suit I never liked, never wearing it out. I couldn't say it was against my will. I was the fourth generation steeped in that church and its traditions. Once or twice year hellfire preachers were brought in to get our souls over the blessed line. These were uncomfortable occasions, feeling the heat of God's stare on you. There in your seat. To be told that maybe this could be the last offer of salvation. Feelings of relief, then guilt as a decision was fudged again. By

mid-teens, the world of Princess Street, Ballymena and our church was beginning to feel claustrophobic. I sensed a bigger place elsewhere. Sensed change.

A couple of years later with a group of friends, we started to skip Sunday morning service. We would be at the tail end of the crowd going into the church – the meeting house the early Presbyterians called them – then we'd turn sharply and walk off up the empty street. We had about an hour and a half to ourselves and headed for the People's Park, walking its many paths and messing about. One or two always offering stories of recent exploits with girlfriends, different to the ones they'd told in church weeks before. Our return would seamlessly join the worshippers leaving the church and looking forward to their Sunday dinner. Morning service was always full. No one ever noticed a half dozen missing souls. Not daddy anyway. And the subject of the sermon never came up at Sunday lunch. Though I strongly suspect that six young fellas in suits strolling the quiet Sunday morning streets was a giveaway.

Before that came music. And girls. But music started it, with Procol Harum's Whiter Shade of Pale. I was fifteen, hormones starting to surge. It was the number one hit all summer long. Playing on the radio. In shops and cafes. It drifted through open doors onto the sunny streets. Played over the Tannoy at the agricultural showgrounds on show day, over the preened cattle and shiny new-model tractors. The sound of the churchy Hammond organ and the cryptic lyrics wrapped me in pleasure and hope. The Summer of Love, they called it later. And it was one of those innocent summers before all hell broke loose.

I had no idea what the song's words meant. It didn't matter. The song painted my imagination in colours that wouldn't fade. The images were brighter and fresher than the repetition of Bible stories that reduced them to doom-laden prophecies. Perhaps the organ made it instantly familiar. There were snippets of the lyrics I knew. They created images that were gossamer yet sharp, evocative yet ambiguous, heavenly yet earthy. The familiar chorus. The organ lifts and surges. I'm gone.

And so it was that later
As the miller told his tale
That her face, at first just ghostly
Turned a whiter shade of pale

We skipped the light fandango
Turned cartwheels 'cross the floor ...

As the ceiling flew away ...

She said "there is no reason"
And the truth is plain to see ...

One of sixteen vestal virgins
Who were leaving for the coast ...

And so it was that later
As the miller told his tale
That her face, at first just ghostly
Turned a whiter shade of pale,

Turned a whiter shade of pale

If the song opened a window on an alluring world, it also started a struggle between my conscious and my increasing secular self that would see-saw on for years. For a while, in late teens, this seemed relentless. The squabbling would eventually quieten, but it would take years to away. In our faith, it's a personal crusade. It's my battle with the Devil in all his forms. An internal battle for the most part. That is until you win out and proclaim that you are 'saved', or don't and remain beguiled by Satan. There's no middle way. It's stark, God or the Devil. The first line of our BB anthem goes 'Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war.' Despite all, I was beginning to turn my back on that march and move in another direction.

There was a multitude of other songs I remember that year: The Monkees' I'm a Believer, The Beatles' Strawberry Fields, The Stones' Ruby Tuesday, Scott McKenzie's San Francisco, Pink Floyd's See Emily Play, Jackie Wilson's Your Love, Jimmy Hendrix's Hey Joe, and that's not half of them. They all helped colour my world, and lift the grey skies of Ulster. But it was a Whiter Shade of Pale that for me marked a beginning. To Gary Brooker and Procol Harum, thank you.

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