

# ABIDE WITH ME



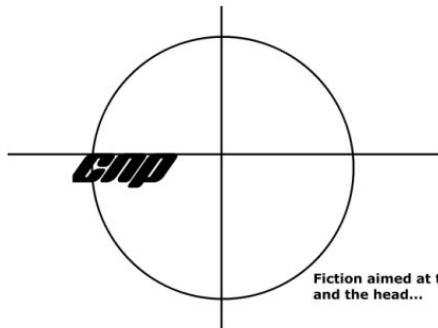
IAN AYRIS

A story about friendship,  
community, football, hope,  
and biscuits...oh, and gangsters.

Caffeine Nights Publishing

# Abide with Me

Ian Ayriss



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## Ian Ayris

Ian Ayris was born in Dagenham, Essex, in August 1969. Having spent most of his childhood more interested in kicking a tennis ball about the school playground with his mates than actually learning anything, he managed to leave the public education system in 1985 with but two O' Levels and a handful of C.S.E.'s,

And a love of writing.

His academic achievements set him up nicely for the succession of low paid jobs he has maintained to this day. These jobs have included a three year stint as a delivery boy for an electrical company, five years putting nuts and bolts in boxes in a door factory, one day in a gin factory, and three months in a record shop. He has spent the last sixteen years, however, working with adults with learning difficulties, and in the meantime, has become a qualified counsellor.

Ian's love of writing resurfaced late in his thirties, in the guise of short stories. He has since had almost thirty short stories published both in print and online, and is currently studying for a degree in English Literature.

Ian lives with his wife and three children in Romford, Essex, and is a lifelong Dagenham and Redbridge supporter.

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If I've left anyone out, please forgive me. The writing of this book really does feel like one big group effort. Thank you all.

Finally, thank you to my parents for the constant belief and encouragement they gave me throughout the writing of this book.

And my sister, Louise, for showing me what courage is.

Abide With Me





## **CHAPTER ONE**

There's things happen in your life what go clean out your head. They don't *mean* nothing, see. Most of your life's like that. And there's some things you remember cos they was good and they make you smile even though you know nothing's ever comin back, no matter how hard you wish it. And there's people. Good people. People you won't never see again. People what you loved so much it tears you apart just thinkin of em. It tears you apart cos you know you won't never see that look in their eyes or feel their hand on your shoulder or what it was like just bein with em.

It's all gone, see. And there ain't no way now you can tell em how much you loved em. Not fuckin ever.

But there's other things what happen, other things you don't never wanna remember, cos they hurt. They hurt too fuckin much. And when you close your eyes it's them things what come shoutin and screamin and crawlin out the mist in your head.

Every fuckin time.

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### **May 5th Nineteen-seventy-five**

Elvis is blarin out Blue Suede Shoes in the front room. Me and Mum's in the kitchen, makin claret and blue paper chains. We got loads of em piled up all over the floor and the table. Bloody loads of em. Dad reckons the house gotta look proper for the match, you know. He's already got em stuck round all the windows, up the tops of the walls, hangin off the ceilin, up the bannisters. Absolutely bleedin everywhere. We been at em since last night, me and Mum, makin em quick as we can, and we got up early to finish off the rest but Dad's stickin em all over the gaff and we can't hardly keep up. He pops his head round the door. His quiff's all fucked and it's

hangin over his face like a dead cat. Gives me a wink, he does, and a big thumbs up, grabs handful of paper chains, and he's off.

Fuckin cracks me up, my dad. Mum just ignores him. She don't like it when he starts on the sauce early. Don't like it one bit. Me, I just think it's funny.

We're comin to the end of another lot, me and Mum. Nearly out of sticky tape. Then there's this crash comes out the front room. We both fly in there. Dad's on his arse, paper chains over his head, pissin himself. Thinks it's fuckin hilarious. Mum don't. She's seethin. Her face is all red and everything. But she holds it in. Second time he's come off the ladder this mornin. Silly sod. He'd normally be up for a right bollockin by now, but today's different.

Ten years, see, since the Hammers was at Wembley. Nineteenth of May, nineteen-sixty-five. Cup Winners' Cup Final. Mum and Dad got married the Saturday before, so they was down some caravan at Clacton when the match was on. His mate, Tommy Fuller, he had tickets and everything. Dad watched it in the social club on the site, pissed, Mum reckoned. Yep, he gave up bein at Wembley that day, all for Mum. That's fuckin love, that is. Dad reckons today's the biggest day of his life since then – the match, not marryin Mum – even bigger than when the Hammers won the World Cup in sixty-six.

I know Dad's breakin his neck to get to the game today. I been hearin him and Mum shoutin loads lately, you know, about how tight things is at the minute, so there weren't never no chance he was gettin there. I reckon that's why he's pissed this mornin. So close, you know. So fuckin close.

Mum's holdin the ladder this time, but Dad's nearly come off again. Swayin all over the place, he is, and he's gettin some right filthy looks off Mum. Back steady now. That big grin. I'm layin on the floor, lookin up at him. Wanna get a good look for when he goes next time. He's reachin up, about to hang some paper chains round the light, when he looks down at me, steadies himself, and takes a deep breath like he's about to say something really important.

'Like Christmas in claret, this is, son,' he says, startin to sway. 'Christmas in bleedin claret.'

Makes no fuckin sense to me, if I'm honest, but Dad says it like he's Winston bloody Churchill.

Mum shakes her head at him slow, raises her eyebrows and rolls her eyes all in one hit. Makes me smile cos when she does that, I know she loves him more than anything in the whole world.

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By kick-off, the house is packed. Mum, Dad, me, Nan and Grandad, Auntie Ivy, Auntie Gwen. Me uncle, Uncle Derek, he's Spurs and Dad won't have him in the house. Not on a day like this. Fuckin fair enough, when you think about it.

Auntie Gwen's brought me round a claret and blue scarf she's knitted special and Auntie Ivy's done some fairy cakes with claret and blue icing. The cakes look fuckin ropey, tell you the truth, but they're all gone by the time Bonzo's leadin the lads out at quarter to three.

Nan and Grandad's sittin on the settee and Mum's on the arm, ready to jump up to make a cuppa at a moment's fuckin notice. Nan used to be the same till she got ill. Now she don't hardly move at all. Auntie Ivy's on her knees behind Nan and Grandad, pokin her face out the top of the settee, and me Auntie Gwen's in the other armchair, suckin on a fag. I'm about two foot from the telly. I got me light blue school shirt on and me mauve tank-top, and me heart's beatin ten to the fuckin dozen inside. Dad's behind me. In his armchair. I've just looked round, and he's sittin there like he's plugged into the fuckin mains.

'John?' Mum says. 'Where's Becky?'

I know Becky's me little sister and all that, and I love her to bits. But fuck me, she's hard work.

'She's over here, dear,' Auntie Ivy says, holdin her up from behind the settee.

Little mare's got a mouthful of paper chains. Auntie Ivy ain't got a clue, but Mum's see em.

'Becky!' she says. 'Take them out of your mouth right this instant!'

Becky gives Mum one of her big grins. She looks just like Dad when she does that, like what he does when Mum's tellin him off when he's pissed.

'You naughty girl,' Auntie Ivy says, pullin the paper out of Becky's mouth and holdin her close at the same time. She rubs her nose on Becky's, both of em gigglin, and puts her down so we can all go back to the telly.

The players are all lined up now. Some Duke of fuckin somewhere's goin along the line shakin hands with em.

Mum pipes up again.

'Who's he, dear?' she says.

Mum likes to know things like that, you know, useless shit what

don't mean fuck all. But Dad don't answer. He's in a world of his own.

The bloke on the telly's goin on about Bobby Moore bein captain of Fulham after all them years at West Ham. I can hear me dad whisperin behind me, choked, like it's right from his heart, you know.

'You'll always be an 'ammer, son,' he's sayin. 'Always a fuckin 'ammer.'

I look round. Dad's got his eyes bulgin like they're gonna burst out his head and his knuckles have gone all white where he's holdin on to the arms of the chair so hard.

The whistle goes. Dad goes bang.

'COME ON YOU FUCKIN IRONS!'

'Bill!'

But Dad ain't takin no notice of Mum. He don't mean it. Can't help it. Like he says, this is the biggest day of his life for ten years, and he ain't gonna smooth off the edges for no one. Not even Mum.

Dad don't stop screamin and swearin till the final whistle. Fulham's much better than us first half, and we all know it. We're a division above em and should be strollin it, but they've got guts they have. And they've got Bobby Moore. We sneak a couple of goals in the second half from Alan Taylor, and win two-nil. Fuckin lucky, if you ask me. I'm watchin Bobby Moore goin round shakin hands with the West Ham players at the end of the game, head held high, stridin. And I'm thinkin, that's a real hero. I got a lump in me throat and I got no idea why. Not really. Thought Dad'd be jumpin all over the place by now, up and down like Auntie Ivy and Auntie Gwen, but when I look round, he's just sittin there. Not a sound. And I know he's been watchin Bobby Moore, same as me.

But when the West Ham players start climbin the steps to get the cup, it starts. A sort of low murmur behind me, strained through gritted teeth, like a shit ventriloquist.

'I'm forever blowin bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air.'

There's tears comin down his face and there's car horns soundin outside, cheerin and shoutin and yellin and whoopin from kids runnin down the street.

'They fly so high, nearly reach the sky, then like my dreams they fade and die.'

Fantastic.

Bonzo's liftin the cup, and I got this tinglin all over, like I got a little bit of what Dad's feelin. I look round at him again, and he's stood up clappin with the hundreds and thousands of other

Hammers in the ground. He's got the biggest smile you ever see, and them tears are still runnin down his face.

Then he starts singin again. This time, top of his voice, arms up.

'FORTUNE'S ALWAYS HIDIN, I'VE LOOKED EVERYWHERE, I'M FOREVER BLOWING BUBBLES, PRETTY BUBBLES IN THE AIR.'

Becky waddles up to Dad and he picks her up under his arm.

'Come on, son,' he says to me, and picks me up under the other arm like I'm light as a fuckin feather. Becky's squealin, and Dad's marchin us out to the front door like he's got the strength of a thousand men. When he gets out in the hall he stops cos he ain't got no more hands left to open the front door. Silly bugger. Mum comes out in the hall after us, fearin he's gonna drop us all, squeezes past, and lets us out.

\*\*\*

Street's fuckin teemin. Front doors wide open, people singin, slappin each other on the back, huggin each other. Bubbles everywhere. Even Old Cartwright next door – a miserable bastard at the best of fuckin times – is kitted out in an old Hammers scarf. Claret and blue. Him and his scarf, faded to fuck.

Dad puts me and Becky down, cos he's fuckin knackered, and starts jabberin with Old Cartwright.

Every house in the street's got some sort of West Ham on it, banners, flags, all sorts of shit. All other than the house opposite, they ain't got fuck all. That's the new people. Moved in a couple weeks back. Ain't seen nothing of em, meself, but Mum says the woman's friendly enough.

So here's me, holdin Becky's hand, wonderin why the new people's house ain't got nothing up, when the front door opens and this fat kid comes tumblin out, door slammin behind him. He don't even try and get back in. Just sits on the front step and puts his hands over his ears and closes his eyes. He's got on these grey trousers and white shirt, and he's wearin shoes, and even a fuckin tie. Cup Final day, and he's all got up in his bleedin school uniform. Gotta be some kind of fuckin idiot, obviously.

Dad's still talkin to Old Cartwright, and I'm lookin at this fat kid sittin on the step, sittin like he's shut the whole fuckin world out. I leave Becky holdin onto Dad's legs and go over. The kid's got his hands over his face now, and when I get close, I see he's got blood comin through his fingers and his whole body's shakin.

'You all right, mate?' I says.

He turns his back on me and don't say a word.

'Just askin, that's all,' I says.

Fuckin arsehole.

I sit down on the step next to him. He don't move a muscle, just sits there with his back to me. And then I hear this racket goin on in the house like you wouldn't fuckin believe. Shoutin and crashin and breakin, and shit.

After a while, Dad comes over.

'I'm off down the boozier, son,' he says. 'Tell your mother for us.'

It's like Dad ain't even see the fat kid next to me. Like the kid ain't even there.

\*\*\*

Dad come home two days later after he'd pissed all his wages up the wall. Mum had him in the fuckin doghouse ages for pullin that stunt.

The last few weeks of school fly by. Summer's the same. Every day, me and Dad, over the park, doin the Cup Final all over. When September rolls round, I'm in a new class at school.

And there's this empty seat sittin right next to me.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

Miss Felton. The lovely Miss Felton. Big brown eyes, blonde hair. Face like a baboon's arse.

'Morning, children.'

'Mornin, Miss.'

At ten or eleven, you think you know how things is gonna turn out. You think you know fuckin everything, but you know fuck all, really.

'Right then, everyone. Settle down, please. Thank you.'

'Lisa Cross?'

Nice girl. Chucked herself off Waterloo Bridge at nineteen. Fuckin tragic.

'Here, Miss.'

'George Somerton?'

Road sweeper. Born to push a fuckin broom, that boy.

See, it's always been a shit-hole, Bethnal Green. That's what me dad always reckoned. Always was a shit-hole and always fuckin will be. Only way you make it out, he said, was if you was a boxer or a gangster. Ronnie or Reggie or John H. Stracey. Take your fuckin pick. No? Well, best of bleedin luck.

'Jimmy Lawson?'

Crackhead. Tosser.

'Absent, Miss.'

'Thank you, Susan. Alison Bennet?'

Shelf stacker. Stacks shelves.

'Here, Miss.'

'Steven Dobbs?'

Nutter. Doin a ten stretch in Parkhurst for drivin a stolen motor through Woolies. Maimed twelve.

'Yes, Miss.'

'Johnny Sissons?'

That's me.

'Yes, Miss.'

And as she's readin out the names, goin down the list, I'm sittin here thinkin not a one of us has got a fuckin chance, you know. Not a fuckin hope. I'm thinkin this, when the fat kid from over the road knocks on the classroom door.

Miss Felton comes across and lets him in.

'You must be Kenneth,' she says.

He nods his head, but he don't say a fuckin word or nothing. Miss Felton says for him to sit next to me.

Like I says, the age we was then, you think you know everything. But what you don't know, what you ain't got a clue about, is when the whole world turns to shit and you think there ain't no fuckin way out . . .

'Harry Wilkins?'

'Yes, Miss.'

. . . there's someone gonna come along and turn the whole fuckin place upside down.

'Kenneth Montgomery?'

'Present, Miss.'

\*\*\*

That first day in class, Kenny come in with a busted lip. He come in with pretty much everything after that. Black eyes, cuts, bruises, all sorts of shit. Cos of it, Miss Felton'd talk different to Kenny than what she did the rest of us. Sort of kinder, you know. Always askin if he's all right. Never says he ain't, never gives nothing away, does Kenny. She gives him that lovely smile of hers and moves on. Never pushes it, she don't. It's like she thinks he's gonna break or something.

Wilkins pokes me in the back. He's always tappin me for something, that leechin bastard.

'Johnny,' he says, 'you got a spare pencil, mate? I've left mine at 'ome.'

I shake me head. I've only got one that ain't broke at the end, and I ain't givin him that. Next to me, Kenny's got this sort of writin set out. Metal case and everything. Two pencils, rubber, ruler, and a fuckin fountain pen, would you believe. None of us got one of them. He's writin the date in his exercise book, tongue out the side of his mouth like he's really concentratin. Eighth of September nineteen-seventy-five.

Big black letters at the top of the page.



'Oi, Fatty?' Wilkins says. 'Give us one of them pencils.'

I tell Wilkins to fuck off, and give him a look so he knows I ain't messin. Kenny's sittin dead still, lookin forward, like he ain't heard nothing, but I know he has cos the fountain pen in his hand's shakin on the side of the metal tin.

I start turnin round to give Wilkins another mouthful, when Miss Felton spots us. Asks if we're all right. I tell her Wilkins has forgot his pencil.

'Thank you, John,' she says, and tells Wilkins to go and get a pencil off her.

'Yes, Miss,' he says.

Wilkins pushes Kenny in the head when he goes past him and whispers something in his ear. Kenny goes all red, and Wilkins goes up to get his pencil. Horrible fucker, Wilkins.

'Now, children. I'd like you to open your desks and take out your maths books, please. We'll begin the year with a little test.'

Groans. Desk lids creak up and down. Pencils clatter on the floor. Someone farts. That'll be Lenny Thompson – Thommo. My best mate. Filthy fucker, he is. Everyone laughs, the boys anyway. Not the girls. A fuckin maths test is serious shit to them, and they give us some right old looks. I look across at Kenny. He's sittin up straight, pencil in his hand, tongue out the side of his mouth like before, ready to start.

'That'll do, children. Lenny, do have some manners, please.'

'Yes, Miss.'

'Now, complete this test in silence, as best you can everyone. Thank you. Okay. Number one. Eighteen plus fifty-seven.'

Pencils scratch. Thommo lets one off again. Sniggers all round. Miss Felton can't be bothered with him no more, and carries on with the test.

'Number two. Ninety-six minus twenty-five.'

I get four out of twenty. Not bad, for me. Kenny gets two. Bottom of the class. And he gets this big smile on his face when Miss Felton tells him, like he don't even know how fuckin stupid he is. All dressed up in his la-de-da and he's thicker than the fuckin lot of us. And as she's talkin to him, Miss Felton, he's got his head down already, writin tomorrow's date on the next page. No doubt in my mind there's something wrong with the geezer. No fuckin doubt at all. Knows his days, though, I give him that.

But he stood out the day he walked in, Kenny did. There's the rest of us, shirts hangin out, trainers, hair not washed for days, and there's him with his white shirts and shiny shoes, and this flowery

fuckin tie round his neck. Ain't like he's even gotta wear it. Not part of the school uniform or nothing. Gets peanuttied more times than I can count, he does, but he never takes the fuckin thing off. Poor bastard gets his fair share of kick-ins an all. I do me best lookin out for him, you know, best I can, but it's like he's fuckin askin for it what with dressin like that and bein so fuckin dopey. I mean, for fuck's sake.

\*\*\*

It's me birthday come end of October. I'm about the oldest in our year, other than Lindsey Rogers, of course. She always brings a load of sweets in when it's her birthday. That's why I remember that. I have all me birthdays over The Barmy, loads of mates, kickin a ball about. And this one ain't no different.

But on this birthday, for some reason I ain't got no fuckin clue about, Mum makes me invite Kenny. She says it's only right, seein as he lives across the street an that, and I sit next to him in class. Kenny don't seem too keen on the idea when I tell him, to be fair. But he turns up anyway, in his bloody shirt and shoes and tie get-up, mind. Fuckin idiot.

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Park's empty. Fuckin brilliant. No one wants Kenny on their team, but Dad puts him on ours anyway. We stick him in goal, get him out the way, you know.

Robbie Jenkins won't take his coat off for a post, not even when I ask him nice and tell him it's me birthday. He says he don't care. Reckons his mum'll kill him if he gets his coat dirty, so we gotta move the pitch up the slope and use this big fuck off tree for one of the posts. Seems a good idea at the time, till Robbie slides his leg right across the side of it tryin to clear one off the line. Cuts his knee right open. Has to go back to my house with his jumper wrapped round his leg to stop the blood pissin out. Serves him fuckin right, I reckon.

We're a man short, cos of Robbie, but none of us care. We play on for hours, till it gets dark and none of us can see fuck all. Dad's ref. I score loads and Kenny's shit. Got no fuckin idea. He won't dive or nothing. Kitted out like a fuckin waiter I don't suppose he was ever gonna anyway. He can't even catch a ball. Only time he kicks it, the silly bastard falls flat on his arse. Even Dad laughs at that one. A couple of times, Kenny gets the ball right in the face. And he never even fuckin flinched.

Back home, Mum tells us all to go up and wash our hands. There's about ten of us, so it's a bit of a stampede. Kenny's standin in the hall waitin for the rest of us so he can go up.

When we go in the front room, Dad's set up the wallpaper table and Mum's chucked a tablecloth on it and filled her best Tupperware with jam sandwiches, chocolate fingers, crisps – mostly twisters, cos I love them – plastic beakers full of Cherryade, and a plate of marshmallow teacakes. They're Becky's favourites. After we've stuffed all that, Mum dishes up the jelly and ice-cream. After that, she brings out this big fuck-off trifle with loads of hundreds and thousands on it. Knows how to do a party, my mum. Kenny gets a bit of stick when the trifle comes out, but Mum says anyone who carries on can go home. That stops it. We ain't a bad lot, you know, just kids, that's all.

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Was a couple months later, headin for Christmas, when Mum tells me I'm goin round Kenny's for tea. Says she bumped into his mum in Sainsbury's and his mum tells her what a great time Kenny had at me party and that she'd love to have me round, or some such bollocks. That day at school, Kenny never says nothing. Not one fuckin word. Then, when the bell goes at the end of the last lesson, he says to me about it. Don't look too fuckin chuffed neither. Sort of embarrassed, like. Can't say I'm over the fuckin moon meself, lookin at the state of his face every fuckin day.

We walk out the gates together, and he goes left instead of right. I ask him where he's goin. He tells me he's goin the long way round.

When we get to his house I see the nets in the front room move. Kenny's mum opens the door before we get to the house and comes scurryin out. Holds him right tight to her. Kenny, he's stiff as a board. When she lets him go he legs it in the house and I can hear him peltin straight up the stairs. His mum looks over at me.

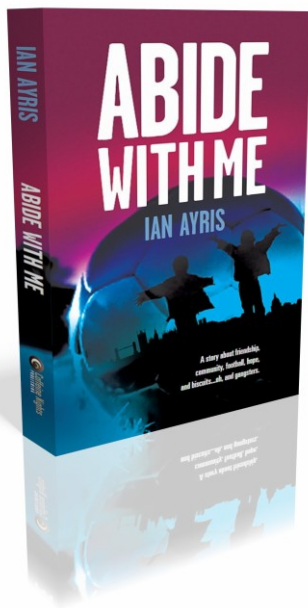
'Hello, you must be John,' she says.

Posh bird. Can't be from round here. Loads of make-up an all, looks like one of them fuckin mannykin things in the shops. And she's got this hurry-up look on her like she don't wanna be leavin Kenny too long in the house on his own.

'I've heard so much about you,' she says, and hurries me inside.

I wonder if the old man's about. By the look on the old girl's face, and how Kenny's shot up them stairs, I reckon he probably is.

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