



STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN

A Life with The Police,

and Pyrenes  
Polg,

STEWART COPELAND



# Strange Things Happen

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A Life with the Police, Polo, and Pygmies

**Stewart Copeland**

 HarperCollins e-books



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# PART I

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## STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN





**Tarazi, Lennie, me, Aragoosie (1965)**



**Tarazi with UN bunker (1998)**



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## CHAPTER 1

### **A LETTER TO A CHILDHOOD FRIEND**

2009

*Dear Iskandar,*

*A lot has happened since we broke that branch off of old Abu Tannous's olive tree, behind the Tarazi Palace. Do you remember our little town in the Lebanese hills overlooking Beirut? That was back in 1965. The Russians had just made it into outer space and I was playing in my first band. I wonder what you and your mom are up to now.*

*We parted rather suddenly when my dad evacuated us after his CIA cover was blown. Do you remember that English kid, Harry Philby? Well, his dad's cover was blown, too—as a double agent for Russia!*

*So we got pulled out of the American Community School in Beirut, and I was packed off to boarding school in England. Out in the misty wilds of Somerset, at Millfield School, I kept on blasting on the drums whenever I could. It was difficult because of the noise they made. Wherever I could find a cellar or an attic, or a distant outbuilding I would drag in my four big heavy cases, unpack my kit, and blaze away like fury. It never lasted. Someone was always annoyed by my art, and I would be cast out again.*

*But I got pretty good at it. By the time I left college, I could get into a semifamous group, and pretty soon I could break out with a little band of my own. We were called The Police and ended up playing huge stadiums. Our songs were glued to the charts. It was a blast! We struggled for two years, surged for four years, and then just sat there at the top of the world for another two years before walking away.*

*So now I've got a real job, a real family, and a real life! I write and record the music you hear in Hollywood movies. I have seven kids! No idea how that happened. Life is pretty settled now, but I keep having these strange adventures. Odd opportunities are attracted to celebrity, even when it's much faded.*

*As I write this Lebanon is rebuilding. Again! Last time I checked, the old palace was still standing. But that was one war ago. If you get a chance, could you check it out for me? You're probably a banker in Dubai by now.*

*Best wishes,*

*Stewart*



### WARDROBE

SUMMER, LATE 1980s

One fine morning, I step out of the shower, peer into my wardrobe, and realize that my life is over. I'm looking at an exotic collection of leather pants, hostile shirts, and pointy shoes. Problem is, I'm a forty-something father of four, and I'm feeling kind of mellow. I'm not angry about anything, and as a tax-paying, property-owning, investment-holding lotus-eater, I am in disagreement with what my clothes are saying to the world. The thrill has gone from frightening the natives. I care not that the world be unruffled by my passage through it.

So what do I wear? What have I got in my closet that doesn't say "FUCK YOU! I'M GOING TO BURN DOWN YOUR WORLD!" For so long, I have had to be worthy of the stares and furtive glances that follow rock stars. It would be unprofessional of me to walk out of my hotel room looking like I'd be safe with children. But now what?

All my life I have lived in self-imposed exile from the normal world. My arty friends and I feel like we are the only humans in a world of robots. A business suit is like the carapace of an insect. Conformity is surrender. Even long hair is a cop-out. Mine has had all color peroxidized out of it—heaven forbid that I should be mistaken for a nice hippie.

But I have discovered that some humans are merely disguised as robots. Under cover of conformity strange personalities can emerge. I have started to experiment with other uniforms and disguises. My main circle of friends is the polo set of Gloucestershire. It's only natural that my first attempt at a new mufti would start here. They wear the same clothes that I used to wear in boarding school. Problem is, my career was fueled by a desire to burn down my old school. I get even stranger looks than usual when I show up at the club bar in a blazer, with handkerchief in the pocket. Out on the street, the usual double take is followed by a look of confusion.

The fact is that my dream of lapsing into the countryside in my post-rock star years is not panning out. The flashbulb-popping, tabloid-screaming, chart-topping, crowd-roaring express train of fame may have blazed off over the horizon, but strange adventures still befall me. From dancing the Ndele Banga with the Kamba of Tsavo to elbowing royalty on the polo fields of Cirencester, to sweat jam sessions in Havana clip joints and black-tie curtain calls at my opera premieres, stuff still keeps on happening to me. Only now that I'm off the train, I can play with these things as they go by.

Here follows a collection of strange tales about the things that can happen as I walk in the constant company of a distantly remembered mythical being. Twenty years ago there was this kid with my face up there on the screen, the whole world got a pretty good look at him, and he still hovers just over my shoulder. He's mostly invisible after all these years, unseen by passersby, but in some settings, everyone can see him. In fact they see him and not me. And the strangest things happen.



**Happy in leather.**  
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### LEBANON

1957–67

*Life and times of a diplo-brat in Beirut:  
Cowboys and Injuns in the Crusader castles.*

**P**ete Karnif is looking for us. My bass player buddy Greg and I are skulking in the shadows, but it's time for us to get up there and do it. I'm shaking with fear because I'm twelve years old and I'm about to start getting what I wished for.

There isn't any stage, just some Selmer amps and my drums in a corner of the ballroom at the American Embassy Beach Club in Beirut, Lebanon.

All of the American, British, French, and other European expatriate kids are crammed into the room. In enclaves like this they have re-created an approximation of the teenage life that they should be living back home. They're dancing the Twist and the Mashed Potato and the Frug, whatever that is. My brother, Miles, should know. Even though the cool Mediterranean air breezes across the beach in the open room, the atmosphere is hot hot. These Western kids are desperate to be Western. They don't want to miss any of the teen boom that is happening back in the First World. Ian is lurking somewhere nearby. He got me into this and is getting a huge kick from it.



At my tender age I don't have any idea what it means, but I can feel the buzz. Michele Savage is here. And Connie Ridgeway and Colleen Bisharat. All of the yearned-for fifteen-year-old women—so far above my lowly prepubescent but ardent station—are gyrating to Fats Domino right in front of the gear. I push past them to my drums. Pete is plugging in, and his amp is squawking. The hubbub of voices in the room immediately hushes, and all eyes are on us.

Actually, since I'm sitting down at the drums all I can see is the first row of kids, who look like grown-ups to me. Pete counts us in....

“One, two—”

I never hear him finish the count. I have already embarked on the headlong joyride that is my life.

of drumming. Whatever we rehearsed is gone from my head, but the motor has started. I'm on a pulse and the band is ragged but connected. The kids are dancing to "It's My Life" and I'm driving it. It's My Groove. Somewhere in the years ahead I'll learn how to be exulted and collaborative at the same time. For now though, there is only one thing on the planet, and that is Janet McRoberts dancing in front of me. Her eyes are wide with astonishment. The big girls are moving with seductive intent, and Janet is moving with me. She's being moved by me.

It was just yesterday that I got my first inkling of what music was going to do to my life. At the shawerma stand on the beach I overheard two of the big girls talking about The Nomads.

"I heard they've got a new drummer—you'll never guess who...."

"Yeah I heard, it's Ian's kid brother!"

"Oh I can't wait to see him—is he as groovy as Ian?"

Well, I'm not even close to being as groovy as Ian. Never will be. I'm a skinny twelve-year-old, and these girls are fifteen. They are talking about a mythical being. They're already pouring their young imaginations into the chalice of music idolatry. I badly want to drink undeservedly from that cup. My chest is rising with the idea that the subject of their fancy is nerdy little me.

I've got my hand on the snare and my foot on the kick. The noise makes me big. It grows me up like a shortcut to manhood. Primatologists studying gorillas and orangutans have established the connection between male dominance behavior and noise. Well, here I am, the skinny runt of the litter but as long as I drive the beat, I'm a hairy-assed silverback motherfucker banging tree trunks. I'm swinging through the trees. My voice is a manly roar.

## **FAST FORWARD TO 2001**

Ian is looking up at the bullet holes that have scratched the otherwise pristine facade of our old home in the hills overlooking Beirut. The city is spread out behind us as we gaze up at the wisteria-clad arches. It's a beautiful old Levantine building with soaring ceilings, grand stairways, and baronial galleries. Since my brother and I were last here a half century ago, Lebanon has endured invasion, civil war, occupation, massacre, siege, and pretty much every form of human madness. The neighborhoods where we played have been corroded by warfare, sprayed by automatic rifle fire, plugged by RPGs, or leveled by bombs.



### **There goes the neighborhood.**

But our old villa Tarazi has just these five bullet holes that we can count. Ian figures that a militia gunman must have stood where he is now standing and just sprayed one blast upward. To get someone's attention, no doubt.

I'm standing there with a tear in my eye as Ian disappears. In a moment he is hailing us from the

front balcony, a giant terrace that wraps around the top of the house. He has climbed up the wisteria vines just outside his old room and sneaked back into the house just like he did when he was a teenager returning from the lam. I'm right up there beside him in a flash. We're looking out over Beirut, standing right in the spot where my first drums were set forty years ago.

The drums had a faded champagne sparkle finish. Dad had rented them from a store in town, maybe reluctant to buy any more musical instruments. Our home was a graveyard of abandoned musical toys. My three older siblings, Miles, Lennie, and Ian, had passed right by our father's inducements and exhortations to follow him into music; so when I showed interest he was a little wary at first. My mother bought me a snare drum because I wouldn't leave her alone. It was a white pearl-finished Lefima drum made in Germany, of all places. I've never since seen another drum with that brand.

When my rat-tat-tat became a prolonged irritant to the family, my father began to discern the elemental urge that is the signature behavior of a budding musician. I just could not stop. The power of the noise was endlessly thrilling and empowering. When I wasn't drumming I was air drumming, or worse, I was that kid who drives everyone insane with persistent foot tapping and thigh slapping. It was the nervous twitch from hell.

One day Ian roars up the driveway on his motorcycle with some of his ragged crew. It's his buddies in the band, who have lost their drummer. On the basis of Ian being the coolest kid in town, his kid brother must be at least worth checking out as a replacement.

Here they are up on the balcony, The Nomads, snarling at me to do something hip on my drums. They start flailing at the drums in the worst possible way, and since they too are just callow youths, they're impressed by the ferocity and volume. They are the first in a long line of musicians who have no idea what they are in for when they let me into the band. My father made sure that I had every kind of proper musical training and technique, but no one was ever able to teach me when to shut up.

## 1965

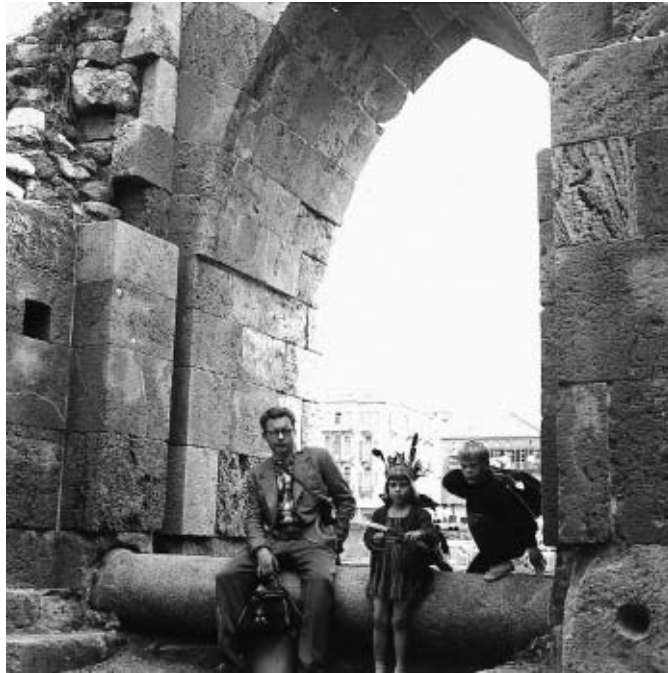
Harry Philby is terrified. The staircase in the old crusader castle has fallen away, but the outer wall, also ruined, provides a jagged few steps up to the next level of the tower. It would be easier to scramble up there if it weren't for the cardboard crusader shield strapped to one arm and the long plastic sword in the other hand. But the plucky young Englisher makes it, and now it's my turn. It's a little easier for me, having watched Harry's route, so soon we are on the top of the tower, two miniature crusader knights ready for battle.

Down below, in the little bay that the castle protects, our parents are lolling on the boat that my father hired to bring us here. Harry's dad, Kim Philby, is kind of a boozy old slob, but his American stepmother, stretched out in her bikini sunbathing on the deck, distracts us from our holy war for a minute. We are looking almost vertically straight down at them. Neither of us boys has any inkling of it yet, but both of our fathers are spies, mine for the "Old Glue Factory" (CIA) and his for the Soviet KGB. Right now they are head-to-head by the tiller down below, chuckling about something. One day soon old man Philby is going to escape in the dead of night on a Russian ship.

There are many advantages to Crusaders & Saracens over Cowboys & Indians. For one thing, the helmet, shield, and sword are cooler than a cowboy hat; and the castles provide powerful set dressing. The crusaders were about raw dumb power. They are remembered in these parts for their suicidal courage and their ignorant cruelty. Their mission here is regarded as a quixotic failure. The magnificent stone castles—much heavier and more businesslike than their European counterparts—couldn't protect them from the wily Saracens. Unlike the natives of North America, the Arab natives were able to evict the colonists. Children like us playing in these relics learn something about the

impotence of empire.

~~All over the Middle East there are layers of discarded military hardware from every age, from axe heads to tank turrets. Pretty much everyone of note has washed over this land, which leaves the current natives as the most variously flavored population in the Western Hemisphere. They are the true descendants of Abraham, Moses, Nebuchadnezzar, Ramses I–XI, Cyrus, Alexander, Constantine, Jesus, Muhammad, Khalil Gibran, and Yasser Arafat.~~



**Tyre Castle with Spy Daddy and Gene Trone**

As a WASP I'm a little humbled by this ancestry. All we've got is King Arthur, Julius Caesar, and Norman.



## CHAPTER 4

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### MUSIC

DECEMBER 1968  
WELLS CATHEDRAL

*In darkest Somerset, Millfield School celebrates Christmas in the huge stone church. I learn to serve the gift.*

A thousand voices echo up the stone arches that frame the ancient stained glass windows. Floodlit from the outside, these twelfth-century images of obscure piety combine with the soaring hymns to sear the art receptors in my adolescent brain. There is nothing more beautiful than music. All of the magnificent architecture that towers overhead is just a vessel for the sound that sweeps through me.

In fact the sound forgives the overall creepiness of the church experience. All afternoon while I set up my drums amid the school orchestra and wait for the Christmas service to begin, that guilt of alienation creeps around me, pervading the cold damp air. Few places are chillier than an English church without its congregation. The cold stone statues are impassive, but they know that I am apostate.

Now it's evening, and the cathedral is warmed by the bodies of the students, teachers, and parents. The giant candles are lit, golden flames reflecting off the brass and glass. Flowers are everywhere. To still my autistic tip-tapping on the drums, Mr. Fox has banished me to the furthest corner of our arm of the cross. We are set up in the south wing, the choir is in the north wing, and the folks are in the stem. All of the religious stuff is happening around the corner in the head of the cross. The mumbling prayers and the shuffling of the congregation from kneeling to sitting to standing are prelude to the rustling of the hymnbooks. The singing starts off ragged but builds and swells as the magic takes hold. Breathing and singing together, the thousand souls become one mighty sound.



**Second drum set**

*And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here  
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

---

I doubt it, based on what I know of Levantine cities. This bit of Blake is the *least* daft of the hymns and carols that are sung. Most of the lyrics are mumbo jumbo. It's the music combined with ritual that thrills the air.

In the final cadenzas of each song the school choir kicks in for the descant, providing a silvery lining to the bellowing flock. The angels are dancing in a shimmering cascade above our heads as a shattering glory of voices lifts the roof.

Mr. F. raises his eyebrow to give me the nod; finally, it's my moment to join the ceremony. The previous hymn has echoed off into silence and the enraptured congregants are creaking in their pews, waiting in the candlelight. They are eager to be touched by the next wave of the shaman's wand.

I'm so ready.

*Tum  
Tadada  
Tum, Tum  
Bumpumpum...  
Tum  
Dadada  
Tum, Tum  
Bumpumpum...*

The tom-tom reverberates with a sonorous boom. Up until now drums have been about assertion and empowerment but this is new. Into my young quavering hand has been placed the rudder of this sacred ship. I can only be a servant of the powerful emotional force that has been created in this ancient stone shrine. All of us are joined at this moment by the momentum of our shared ritual, and I am the beating heart. I am nothing, no one. Just the beating heart of a larger body, enveloped by the soul of the faithful. A synapse closes in the mind of the enraptured protoshaman.

Next morning, when my head clears, it seems obvious that music isn't just a tool or weapon, it's what my life is for. It's powerful juju, and I want to own it as much as it owns me.

The gatehouse lodge to the old Millfield estate is where Mr. Fox rules the music kingdom. In an annex to this quaint little house are the piano rooms, where the music geeks pore over their finger exercises and ear training. This is where the seed planted by my sister, Lennie, back at Tarazi starts to grow. Lennie taught me the connection between the music on the page and the keys on the piano. My good fortune is that my position in the school orchestra means I can schedule piano time, even though my instrument is drums—which unfortunately won't fit into the tiny piano rooms. The school, faithful to my father's wish, has fixed me up a drum tutor in the nearby town, but I can already play my paradiddles better than he can, so this "practice" time is my own.

I can even skive off stables duties by skulking here in music world. I can faintly hear Mozart stammering through the thinly soundproofed walls, but in my slot, I'm hammering two-finger ostinatos of unknown origin.



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