



Vignette # 1

His clothes are near-as-dammit immaculate: pale green trousers with plumb-line creases; a white dress shirt; black Oxford shoes. But he holds a large white plastic carrier bag, grubby and bulging with items of unknown provenance. It is mid-afternoon, yet he appears drunk. And on the back of his pristine black jacket there is pinned a dry-cleaning ticket.

"It's like I drunk myself sober/I get better as I get older" — "Spectre Vs Rector", 1979

"His constant love-battle with his goblin-muse always leaves him stronger"
— Mark Sinker, *The Wire*, August 1986

Mark E Smith's face is a chunk of elephant hide which periodically contorts into impressions of temperance, hilarity, contempt, grave contemplation. Its owner slouches into the red plastic bench seat that runs around the perimeter of this particular corner — a regular corner, apparently — of this particular pub in Cheetham Hill, North Manchester; leans forward in anticipation of further conversation; examines again the two sheets of A4 paper which I handed to him half an hour ago; lets a cigarette burn down in an ashtray; lights another; looks me in the eye.

"I used to be psychic," he says. "But I drank my way out of it."

This statement, delivered deadpan but disconcerting enough in itself, perhaps, is the postscript to a strange and perplexing tale which Mark relates in tones that veer between morbid glee and utter bewilderment.

"I've got a funny story to tell you," he begins, "about the song 'Powder Keg' on the last LP [*The Light User Syndrome*]. It was about the Manchester bombing and all that. *The Sun* kept ringing me up going, 'It's really weird this song of yours: *'Manchester's a powder keg'*.' It's typical *Sun* stuff; they don't get off the bleeding phone. I'm going, 'Well, it's a song I wrote.' And they go, 'Well, it's funny that a bomb in Manchester went off last week and you actually said Manchester is a powder keg. How did you know about it?' It's 10 o'clock in the morning. 'And also you wrote this song about Terry Waite years ago. . . .' And I'm going, 'Yeah, you know.' And I didn't realise this, but they started insinuating that I had inside information: 'It's funny that you knew about Terry Waite's kidnapping, in this song "Terry Waite Sez" in 1986, and then you wrote this song called "Powder Keg" about the Manchester bombing. . . .' And I'm thinking that I'm talking to people like you, but I'm talking to some *slime*, you know. And I'm going, 'Well, yeah, I don't know why it happened, maybe I'm prophetic, you know, because I was a psychic when I was a teenager.' They say, 'So you were psychic about Terry Waite, now you're psychic about the Manchester bomb.'



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Since the dark, spiky days of punk, **The Fall** have been searching for a sound that speaks to hidden and repressed communities the world over. In Manchester, Tony Herrington meets the group's charismatic leader Mark E Smith for a ramble around the Fall world of precognitions, bizarre encounters, and superstardom in Brazil