

Memoire 10

Pyromania and other observations from childhood.

I would have been about seven when one of my brothers shot me. Luckily, he was just practicing on his sibling with an air rifle, so we identified the small hole in my leg as a minor 'flesh wound' and left it at that. My other brother trained with more lethal weaponry—lethal for both the holder of the homemade gun as well as anyone on the receiving end of his innovative weapon. The munitions were gleaned from the school's chemistry department. A combination of sulphur 10%, saltpeter (potassium nitrate) 75%, and charcoal 15% were the necessary ingredients for the production of gunpowder. With a length of copper pipe inserted into a sawn-off piece of log and the acquisition of a ball bearing, *ipso facto*, he had a gun. I don't remember from where he got the fuse, but come the day, yours truly stood holding said weapon aimed at some tin sheds of our unsuspecting next-door neighbour.

With the fuse duly lit, the gun went off. I was thrown onto my back, and a pillar of acrid smoke hung in the air. We had scored a direct hit on one of the tin sheds. Two items of fate favourably conspired on that day: 1. my arm had not been blown off and playing the violin remained a possibility; 2. the neighbour was not standing in front of his shed ...something verging on the miraculous as...

It must be said that the neighbour, Mr Tucker, led a solitary and very accident-prone life. Rather than becoming an expert in DIY, it seemed he did the doing to himself rather than applying it to the task at hand. Once, he set himself on fire and only by jumping into a nearby barrel of water was he saved from third degree burns. After a broken leg incident, he negotiated his domain with a kitchen chair substituted for his plastered leg, which had been set at a right angle rather than straight. This awkward apparition attracted my keen attention as he negotiated the terrain of his rambling back yard. Those tin sheds? He actually lived in them, as his wife only allowed him into the house for afternoon tea at 3pm sharp everyday.

The more I think about my childhood years, the more I realise I was being set up for a life in Australia. Robin Hood Lane where we lived was neither country nor town, nor had it anything to do with the famous, probably fictional, outlaw. The houses were a mix of homemade shacks and 1930s suburbia. Halfway down the road was Robin Hood House, which posed as a genuine country house - looking mediaeval with its Tudor beams - but was probably a fake. We were surrounded by woods and chalk pits - an adventure playground for young boys that came with a roaming freedom that I note has disappeared in today's paranoia for offspring safety. There were young girls too intent on sexual enquiry ...but I ought not go into that, as some of them are still alive. In the school holidays, I often disappeared for an entire day of exploration. I would return at meal times from my clandestine projects with hunger and (what I told myself) was secret knowledge. My parents would not have had a clue as to where I was. Imagination was the only currency. In the 'genuine country house' lived a certain Auntie Nora who wore only black, which was still an option for widows even then in the 1950s. She undertook my first music lessons, which verged on gothic horror in my young mind as she sat in her imperial chair in the middle of the room bashing her walking stick on the floor in a determined 4/4 rhythm. Me (slightly terrified) sang out the rhythm as I was marched around her in strict tempo.

The community (for it was one) consisted of central casting in British eccentricity. Mr and Mrs Hall were a spooky and reclusive brother and sister who lived in a two-storey house that later reminded me of the mother's house in *Psycho*. Mrs Brimstead owned the corner shop, which sold little except firewood and boiled sweets (housed in huge glass jars on the back shelf). One farthing (a quarter of an old penny) would buy some liquorice. The Tworts (I'm not making this name up) drove an antiquated Morris at speeds that, at little more than walking pace, were dangerously SLOW, not fast. They stopped for tea every afternoon and ate margarine and jam on white bread with a knife and fork ...which struck me even then as the weirdest thing.

He had been dead for weeks when discovered by the postman, and my father volunteered for the job to clear out his shack in the woods. Another reclusive, Bruce Moore was whispered as 'the communist' up and down the lane. McCarthyism in the UK was not as severe as the USA, but nevertheless attached itself to outsiders and hermits. Amongst his few possessions were *Das Kapital* and the entire works of Shakespeare. He had been an intellectual in an era of crumbling

empire, seeding much defensive paranoia and reactionary thought about socialism - despite the post war initiation of a National Health Service.

As an unenlightened kid, mental illness was considered either a giggle or something sinister to keep right away from. 'Old Doll' was an elderly woman by the name of Dorothy and probably suffered from dementia. She was a regular in the small parish church of St Albans and literally yelled her head off in the hymn singing with her own atonal versions of Anglican harmony. I remember feeling deeply embarrassed when I had to sit next to her once. Now, I realise that those moments of ecstatic singing were probably the best moments of her fading life and took her musically 'out there', if I had only had the wit to understand.

Before television entered our consciousness, there was the Meccano Set and board games such as Monopoly. Some of the characters in our neighbourhood could have jumped straight off the who-done-it Cluedo game board: Colonel Mustard, with the garden spade, in the conservatory. Well, maybe not the conservatory, but we definitely had a heavily moustached Mr Mustard with spade who also had a good bellow at the Sunday service. No conservatory then, but we did have a garden shed which was a 'holy of hollies' for boys messing around with materials, weapon design, paints, self-inflicted courses on pyromania, a huge pre-war lawn mower, and learning what to do with a generous collection of tools often used inappropriately. In a different life, my father could have been a skilled craftsman. As it was, we had free rein to invent, build, and destroy as we chose.

It's uncanny how images and projects recur through life as a series of loops. It strikes me that most things that engaged or obsessed me before puberty have been circulating throughout my musical career, recurring at regular intervals. Mostly, these interests have to do with the arts, but other mechanical and sociological phenomena present in their continuous appeal. My earliest observation of anarchy was delivered by the Sales family, who lived nearly opposite us. The father rode a rickety, noisy, farting motorbike with sidecar attached, on which many of the seven or so kids would bludge a lift. I was impressed by this deviant mode of transport. Years later, I would emulate Mr Sales with my own 1950s Panther 500 (also with sidecar attached) - but, thankfully, not the numerous supply of children. The kids often played in the street as the house mustered only four rooms total. How on earth did they all fit in there? 'Rogy' and some of his siblings would appear stark naked, playing in the middle of the street for most of the summer, scandalising the very proper other residents including my mother. Behaviour was one of her favourite words.

I don't remember meeting my grandfather on my mother's side, as he died when I was young - 'Corgi' was his nickname. William Charles Sultan Khan was his full name. He worked as a janitor cum manager at Gresham College in the city of London. The College was a place of intellectual debate as well as musical and scientific discovery and had been the location for public lectures since 1597(!) Maybe there is a museum gene working away inside me. My first attempts at archeological discovery were outright fraudulent. I created a fake scroll with illegible handwriting, burnt the edges black and brown, soaked it in water and yellow ink, covered the whole counterfeit with candle wax and stuffed it under the house behind some hard-to-reach water pipes - it might still be there unless a plumber has disposed of the in-the-way artefact. But, as I said, there are recurring life themes. Later, in a post-scroll escapade at high school I actually studied calligraphy and even cut a few authentic quills. I still use the skill from time to time, and my short sojourn studying design at art college fed my visual acuity to study serious typography, but no counterfeit scrolls were ever authored again.

Corgi's wife 'Dickie', Mary Ann Daisy Louise Khan (born Villars), was the French connection to the family. She had a sister (one of eight) who immigrated to Australia, but the contact was long lost, and I have often wondered what ever happened to her outside of death. Dickie was a formidable character who often while listening to the news would shout - string 'em up! She had been born into empire in 1881, seen it peak, then decline, and that was probably too much for her. She kept her husband's dress sword in the kitchen for chopping up the cat food. I spent holiday afternoons at her house when my parents escaped for a break for which I gained six (old) pence a week in pocket money. She had two addictions, one was live cricket on TV, the other was smoking her own roll ups - Player's Digger Mixture which was actually a pungent pipe tobacco (sold to British lungs as authentically Australian). I was fascinated by this ritual and very soon I learnt how to roll my own, much to her dismay. In her last years she would retire to her room to listen to her 'noise'.

And noise it was. With the large bakelite valve radio tuned between stations and shaking in rage at full volume, she could be found serenely fast asleep.

My mother, Joyce Heather Khan, lived with 'Dickie' and 'Corgi' in a small apartment above Gresham College. She was a city girl, and I think she never quite adjusted to her role of mothering three boys in the semi-rural 'wilds' of North Downs, Kent (the so called garden of England). I remember her bargaining for vegetables over the fence with our other neighbours The Foxes. Somehow rural capitalism didn't fit, she had to learn the role. The war was probably the guiding principle of mental aptitude for that generation; her husband, in the parallel movie, surviving three and half years of severe deprivation in Japanese prisoner of war camps. (I write elsewhere about his extraordinary musical instrument making as a POW). As Mum used to say 'they muddled through'.

The DIY way of life manifested itself through a number of the citizens in Robin Hood Lane. Mr Mercer made a living out of recycling old bicycles. He cobbled together sizes for all ages. I would have ridden probably three of his re-makes before the age of ten. Sixty years later I could have asked for his expertise in Pursuit - my multi-bicycle powered musical extravaganza featuring 130 bikes. Another vehicle was parked on the Mercers' land, an ancient wooden 'Gypsy' caravan - incongruous, exotic, wonderful and occupied by the Collins family. Just up from them lived Mr Catford, from whom I learnt the secrets of homemade wine making at a ridiculously young age. My parents tolerated this passing fad and even graciously sampled some of the brew, even though I had no patience to wait until the fermentation process was complete. The idea of creating booze (a tasty positive) made from stinging nettles (an irritating negative) appealed to my growing interest in conceptual collision.

Mrs. Horsey, her bees, her TV, another incongruity. When in conversation with a human she would glance nervously every ten seconds at the TV in case she missed something critical in the afternoon soap. And then she would jump up and announce that it was time to spin the honey. I guess in hindsight the loud buzz of bees and the muffled drone of TV dialogue did have something in common. But more importantly, what I learnt from the exercise was that centrifugal force was a thing - not far down the pecking order of absolutes after gravity and death.

Daytime Television existed in black and white on tiny veneer clad screens, along with spaghetti that came in tins courtesy of Heinz, chewing gum, Cowboys and Indians - although not having a TV I would be allowed to goggle The Lone Ranger at Mrs. Emerson's (another neighbour) but only for 15 minutes a visit. We were an American colony except nobody would admit it. And yes, I know where I was when news of President Kennedy's assassination arrived, I was eating a muffin, drinking a mug of tea, with the rest of the family peering into the suffocated images - trying to make sense of technology, time and distance, as much as a murder. It was years before I realised the theme music to The Lone Ranger had been stolen from the French (Rossini) and that flies could live happily inside a television set (Nam June Paik), and that Spaghetti was the longest food ever and had been falsified to come truncated (in tins).

The brand spanking new Crematorium arrived in Robin Hood Lane in 1959 when I was eight years old. I had questions of course, but no satisfactory answers. How did it work? Did they keep their clothes on? No one was really forthcoming with information. It became a rather mysterious if not gloomy part of the environment. I observed the smoke and came to my own conclusions.

To the west of us on the unsealed Tunbury Avenue lived the Easts, a family of Indian immigrants. The father was a doctor; his sons were also very smart. On a visit to play with the youngest son's elaborate model train set, I first encountered the violin. 'I don't like the violin', I said, not even having heard one. 'Sit down, shut up, and listen to this' he said, and he put on a recording of the Bach Double Violin Concerto in D Minor. I melted, instantly hooked.