

Chapter Eleven - Only One Hymie

Even as a young man I had already lived out most of my dreams. There are not many who can say such a thing. As a child at first – despite blowing on a mouth organ - I had wanted to be a writer, a journalist or a storyteller. Then, in the late fifties, when pop music became enhanced and empowered by its engagement with the Blues, I decided to become more serious about being a musician. Then, in the early sixties, I found myself at art college, and – under the influence of Silverman and the rest of the mischievous bunch of teachers and lecturers at his college – became myself quite lofty and impressive. I met there the beautiful young woman who would one day be my wife. Dream had led to dream. The wholesome dreams of childhood all realised, I moved quickly onto grander things, to impossible things. I wanted to make music that would accelerate spiritual growth, to tell stories that would inspire international unity and world peace, to be nonetheless patriotic and loyal to my country and its allies, to be a visionary, a seer, a seeker. All at once. I was, I would one day accept, hopelessly addicted to anything and everything. Most specially, I was addicted to the concept of ‘more’. Thus it was my dreams reverted to dreams.

I had wanted everything. In the end, particularly everything low, the more degrading the better. I struggled through this period of my life in my mid-thirties attempting to poeticise my decadence like a kind of pop Bukowski. It worked only subjectively; I had felt I was living life on the edge, impudently inviting the Devil into my dreams, and eventually one night seeing an embodiment of some gross and stench-emitting Satan squatting at the end of my bed. I felt then no fear, only boredom.

There is conflicting evidence about me. I am high, and yet low. It seems I had to get high to go low; to go low to get high. In real time, in ‘tick-tock’ time, when Myrna had her thirty-fourth birthday, I had been thirty-one, and not quite so fucked up as to be unable to attend. I had already begun to stumble, revisiting again and again the frustrations of creative projects that required more advanced technology, more sympathetic and unconditional support, more money and more time than I could ever have at my disposal. But having fulfilled all my wishful dreams and dark fantasies, I had never been able to let one final dream-adventure go. Even now I travel uneasily between this humble room and the gaseous heights whereon I feel closest to my object – my beloved. I know the trio are refining their dreams. From my lofty Grand Tier box (I play to the Gods from the stage, but prefer more comfortable seating when I buy a ticket to be your narrator), looking backwards through time, I can see them preparing.

The curtains shook a little as Damoo quickly secured the pulley-ropes. All present gasped in astonishment. Behind the curtains was what would normally – in a real old-fashioned theatre – stand before them: it was a beautifully painted miniature proscenium arch, gold and silver, entwined with real vines and creeper that had been sprayed with paint. At its peak was mounted a gilded eagle, probably ejected from some redundant Christian pulpit. Around the edges were tiny angels and fairies. No more than eighteen feet high, had it been full-size it would have duly graced some small provincial theatre, or one more modest and eccentric in the West End. The lights grew in intensity and the audience saw a shallow staircase, with perhaps ten low, deep steps that climbed from the level of the stage to a dais upstage on which had been created an arch of blossom and flowers. On that dais, inside the arch, stood Damoo, dressed like a Mullah. Bizarrely he held a huge bible, and hauled a purple catholic ribbon around his shoulders. He was ready, so it seemed, to conduct a marriage.

Myrna would, could she have seen her own face, have added the mortified embarrassment of the vain to her absolute and arresting astonishment at what she saw on the stage before her. On the left Gabriel had taken his seat at the baby grand piano, to his left was an electronic organ of some kind. Her son, wearing the tuxedo and bow of his Bar Mitzvah, stood centre stage. Myrna had never seen him look so composed, so certain, so self-assured. She cast a glance at Hymie, sitting at her right, still firmly clutching her arm in reassurance. The two boys were so alike, so handsome. But what was Damoo (as the Mullah) *doing*? What in heaven's name was he meant to be? A single light shone from above in a vertical shaft, illuminating Josh like a figure in a dream. She inspected the programme. She became confused by the names she saw: Trilby, Hymie, music by Gabriel, special effects by Damoo. The stage darkened and as her eyes adjusted she could only see her son's face, nothing else.

Then the music began. Gabriel, solo, launched into an elegant ascending octave motif. The music challenged and engaged the audience in a moment, and then – as Josh (playing Hymie) looked up into the light that shone down from above, a voice sang out.

'Only one Hymie

It was a young girl's voice. And then again she sang, and Gabriel demonstrated – in a single audacious change of key on the last syllable of the phrase – that in a short space of time he had evolved from mere prodigy to a quite masterly composer for his age.

'Only one Hymie

This time Josh joined in, the harmony with the young girl's offstage voice was clever and fresh. As the shared line finished he added:

'That's me.'

Myrna looked at the real life Hymie sitting beside her. She began to whisper, but loud enough in the small hall for everyone to hear.

'This is terrible. Just terrible. What are these children up to? I'm so suspicious. They wouldn't tell me what this is all about. An opera? Schmopera!!'

'Relax sis,' calmed Hymie. *'Let's see what happens.'*

Suddenly the lights came on, and Gabriel continued to elaborate on his theme in the arch high-Broadway style of Sondheim at his most classical. The lyrics that Josh had written were mature and witty. Hymie himself – bemused to be the singular subject of the little opera – settled back to enjoy the precocity and audacity of the three children.

Leila was standing by Gabriel, her hand on his shoulder. She held a small baton and was conducting, tapping her palm. Trilby, sitting in the audience directly behind Myrna, recognised herself straight away. Gabriel, playing his role – he merely had to be himself – responded to his piano teacher's spurring with a flurry of extemporised elaborations over the theme. Josh had gone, Leila took his place at centre stage, the overhead spotlight now beaming down onto her head. She was blonde. Blonde!

'It's a wig,' thought Myrna. *'She's Trilby.'*

'Only one Hymie,' sang Leila.

Her voice not as beautiful as Josh's, but now supported by two of her friends from school standing at the back.

'No one else on earth could ever blind me – like this. / Or even find me – such bliss. / If you were gone / You'd still be here,'

She held her heart.

'Beat, beat, beat, beat,' the music grew louder. *'BEAT, BEAT, BEAT, BEAT.'*

Gabriel was playing intently, his composition complex and challenging. There was a genuine sense of awe growing in the little audience.

'Only one Hymie' sang the girls.

'That's me,' sang Josh parenthetically from offstage.

'Why can't they accept that life excites me,' Leila was in better form now. *'This boy ignites me / His family fights me / But he's still here.'*

Again, Leila clutched her heart and the gorgeous theme was interrupted by the thumping, pop-like diversion:

'Beat, beat, beat, beat,' sang the chorus. *'BEAT, BEAT, BEAT.'*

By the time the song reached its conclusion no one present could be in doubt: Leila was playing a character called 'Trilby' who was certain there was only one man on earth for her, no one else would do in life or death. This man was played by Josh, and his character's name was 'Hymie'. Myrna moved to stand up, Hymie restrained her.

'This is ridiculous,' she sputtered.

'You're just jealous sister,' he teased.

Myrna turned to him, tears in her eyes. Her maternal expression - always frozen to express constancy, strength, the ability to cope, stamina, certitude, courage – dissolved and she turned into her young brother's arms, weeping like a six year old.

'But it's my birthday.'

On stage the proceedings proceeded. Leila (as Trilby) disappeared for a moment, and the audience gasped with delight as she reappeared in a wedding gown. Then, by her side, was Josh (as Hymie) in his tuxedo. Donnie and Connie kept exclaiming proprietarily at every spectacular turn of events as though investors in a new West End show. The real Trilby was betwixt them, and brought her eyes shyly to meet those of her beau, who had taken the opportunity of Myrna's temporary residence in his

arms to look over her shoulders back to his beloved. He grinned mischievously.

Leila, to the left, and Josh, to the right, reached out across the stage to one another as Gabriel turned to the organ and began wringing his repetitive theme into Messiaenic proportions. There was a huge flash on the stage, and the most shocking, compact explosion like a gunshot. The music stopped. The entire stage and part of the audience was engulfed in white smoke. Damoo could be heard off-stage, whispering frantically.

‘I’m so terribly sorry. It was just supposed to be a small puff of smoke. He has gone to heaven quietly you see, with lovely lighting. What a terrible bang. I am so, so, so sorry.’

‘Shut up dad,’ Leila muttered under her breath, hardly moving her lips. ‘Get on with it.’

Josh had disappeared. Leila was alone on the stage. Out of nowhere appeared three boys dressed in tuxedo outfits cobbled together from school uniforms and borrowed bow-ties. The group was led by Phil. Let me say a word about the secondary members of the cast.

Gabriel, Josh and Leila enjoyed an intimate and special relationship, but they weren’t incestuous or precious; their founding social circles still enveloped them. For Gabriel and Josh, their friend Phil was the closest. He played guitar very well, though not to Gabriel’s standard on piano. He was a rather ordinary boy, backward with girls, forward with off-the-cuff humour and ready wit. When he could, he spent his time with Gabriel and Josh, but when they were secreted with Leila, plotting and scheming, he fell back to two less charismatic friends who sang in the local church with him. The sea-scouts had brought them all together. Phil however was adopted by the principle trio as an unofficial member of their band, arts-lab or secret-society; they weren’t yet sure what it was.

Leila’s best friend had been another Muslim girl whose parents were from Pakistan. But Damoo’s mother disapproved of her family, she felt they were too fundamentalist, part of some radical sect. Eventually, Leila tired of trying to make her friend comfortable in her home, and moved her attention to Dotty. She lived in a nearby street, was blonde with very curly hair, a quintessential doll. They enjoyed the challenging contrast they presented to the neighbourhood. They linked arms on their way to school, and whispered conspiratorially in each other’s ears. When either was challenged by one of their own kind – what was there in the friendship? – she would profess passionate commitment and friendship: *they were so alike deep down that they felt like sisters*. They enjoyed the evident irritation

such declarations generated in their inquisitors. But Dotty, like Phil, had her rear-guard. She was popular and sought after whenever she was available. Steadily though, she too became drawn into the magical trio's elite group. And so, as a troupe, they were five. In actuality they were three and two, but Phil and Dotty could not see themselves as a pair attached loosely to the trio. They were a part of the team, not driving, not creative, but fundamental nonetheless. Let us return to the play.

Phil and his two fellow choristers taunted Leila, still poised centre stage.

'Only one Hymie.'

They teased, offering flowers and chocolates, circling her, touching her cheek. Leila's Trilby was haughty and indifferent; she put up her hand, showed them her imperious palm, and brushed them off. A light came on again at the top of the staircase and there appeared Damoo once more, ready to perform a marriage. But how could that be? Hymie was gone, blown to bits like Myrna's unfortunate errant late husband. Then, suddenly in a light drift of white smoke, Josh's Hymie beckoned from the top of the stairs. It was clear he had returned from heaven to claim his bride. Two of the merely mortal boys began to squabble over their right to give exclusive suit to their object, and Phil mediated. A fight broke out, and one of the lads pulled a gun. Leila's Trilby rushed to pacify the squabbling boys and there was a shot. She fell. The two boys looked at each other in terror, and fled. Phil was left cradling the limp body of Leila's Trilby. From the dais Josh's Hymie called, and finally – in a lighting scheme that would have done justice to a production of Othello in Stratford – Phil carried Leila (as Trilby) powerfully up the stairs. Trilby passed into heaven and rose, serenely to her feet.

As the couple were united, and Damoo's Mullah blessed the marriage of the dead, the rest of the small cast joined in with Gabriel's exultant organ playing. Leila's Trilby tossed her bouquet into the audience, and Dotty grabbed for it.

'Bugger!' Dotty turned. It was the real Trilby who instinctively caught the tightly ribboned bunch. And as she glanced, laughing, at Hymie, she realised the significance of the reflex and shifted her gaze with concern to Myrna. But Myrna had not seen anything. Her eyes were full of tears. The cast were singing the by then perennial chorus:

Only One Hymie.....

The married couple at the head of the stairs turned again to face the audience, the curtains fell. It was, in that most divine definition of suburban amateur dramatics, a triumph.

Myrna stood up, turned to face Trilby, and with eyes streaming, threw her arms around her one time adversary. Hymie looked shyly at his beloved; all seemed well. Damoo emerged from backstage, protesting that there could be no curtain calls, he had already programmed the computer. Myrna dropped Trilby and ran to him wagging her finger and chiding him for the explosion, but congratulating him for what he had done for the children – and for helping her to see what really mattered in their lives. Damoo explained he had overloaded the little cannon used for the smoke explosion intended to signify Hymie's ascent to heaven. *Trilby's Piano* was a play that changed Myrna's life.

But as the families gathered, lapsed Christians whose children sang in church choirs; good Jews who had learned they could not impede true romance; gentle Muslims who were prepared to risk neighbourhood popularity for authentic dramatic effect; and everyone present – they chatted, hugged, laughed and applauded. The special three, our gifted trio, their inspiration and their cunning so inspired, their talents so concentrated and affecting, had begun a new chapter in what was to prove the most extraordinary life together. And as I myself felt, nothing mattered if it was possible to make your childhood dreams – or even just a single dream – come true. Then, as the stragglers left the building one by one, Myrna snapped to attention.

‘Who got the bouquet?’ She said this gaily, girlishly. ‘Who is next to be married?’

It was Hymie who pointed to Trilby, who held up the little posy. For a second, in which passing moment the ether must have darkened and distant flashes portended storms, Myrna's face composed. And then she smiled, very, very slightly. And nodded; the match was not what she had wanted, but Trilby did truly love the perfect brother, and after everything, that was enough.