

Chapter Three - I Heard Music

Acton is a kind of non-town for many who live anywhere other than its few central main streets. Even at the very heart of Acton there is conflict – for some residents very near the Town Hall and swimming baths prefer to say they live in Southfields. My Acton in the late forties also had bombsites everywhere. In my own street were a number of houses that had been rebuilt while I was still an infant. There was serious poverty in the street in which I grew up. Two families in particular would not be too proud to accept food, old clothes or even money if it was offered, and delivered without ceremony by an unknowing child: ‘Mum says she doesn’t need this, pass it on if it’s surplus to your need.’

It would be pleasant to be able to write that I grew up to be a man, and stayed to watch Gabriel, Josh and Leila grow up in my view. They grew up in my neighbourhood, but by the time the trio were toddlers in the sixties, I was a young pop-star, soon to marry and have children of my own. In 1962, the year Gabriel came into the world, I was seventeen and already working hard on world-domination (musically speaking) and frying my extraordinarily resilient brain cells with marijuana and whiskey.

My lunch consumed, I allow myself to drift again, returning to the comfort of the obsessive rocking that to an outsider typifies the behaviour of a caged animal with a damaged mind. But if I am sick at all, I am sick only with longing. I yearn to be reunited with my beloved, and yet I have forgotten momentarily who that beloved might be. Rocking back and forth I quickly ascend through white light at the top of my head, through colours and music to the warm simplicity of the ether.

Rocking and rocking me

Rhythm is shocking me

Just like a child in your fist

You are knocking me

Rocking and rocking

Autistic, caged I am

Rocking and rocking

And rocking enraged I am....

Drunk with you

This is as close as I can get to that one for whom I long. And from this place I am again distracted by

Gabriel's voice. I can hear, but am not the object of Gabriel's endearing calls.

'When I was a boy, I heard music.'

I try to ignore the gruff and insistent voice. Drawn down, down into colour and music myself, I see reddish sunlight reflecting on the surface of water below. As a younger man I enjoyed this kind of experience as I trained myself to meditate, but now I am initiated. It's a distraction. The air is full of music, at least some might call it that. Colourful flashes begin to transform into tangible objects: flower petals, precious stones, blossom. I know this is not close to my beloved, but I remember the river, and allow myself to move lower. I know I am moving into the psychic territory of my past as I begin to hear bird-song, distant traffic. Now I can smell the fragrance of flowers and plants that surely are not from around me. Kew Gardens, I am near the bend in the river at Kew. Gabriel, a thirteen year old boy in 1975 is sitting on the river bank watching a very high tide carry flotsam away to the sea.

Gabriel's best friend Josh had worn the traditional Yarmulke at certain religious times and once Gabriel had asked if he could wear one too. Josh's mother had said it would be OK, and once he put it on, he would never remove it. As a child Gabriel had had poor eyesight and managed to persuade his mother to get him a pair of prescription sunglasses for a Spanish holiday. Thus equipped, with skullcap and shades, he could recreate himself in a moment by the simple act of moving his cap forward or aft, setting his shades on his forehead, or whipping them away from his eyes in sudden dramatic gesture of emphasis.

Gabriel was drawn to the river – it was a constant preoccupation for him. It was by the river, and particularly by this stretch, that Gabriel heard the most beautiful music. His daydreams were not those of a normal boy, not at such moments.

'Not like the music I heard in church.'

I could hear the boy's youthful enthusiasm rediscovered in the old man's gravely tones.

'I heard it in the air, between the stars and the trees.'

And there it was. That was what was all around me now in the timeless ether. The music as Gabriel had heard it. I had to admit it was engaging. Although I doubted that what the boy had been hearing was his own; if it had been Gabriel's own music how could I have eavesdropped?

‘It was sometimes like singing, sometimes like grand orchestras playing Beethoven’s symphonies. It was always very beautiful.’

And the music that Gabriel had heard sweeps up and carries me higher again where there is no time, and because music itself requires time to exist, to pass, to be divided, there is delivered at last—almost—the promised and longed for silence. But Gabriel’s music, like a deep, dark, rising current, really does *seem* to sweep me higher and higher; I am as high in the ether as I have ever been, and although the now distant, almost inaudible music still distracts, I feel closer to my beloved than ever before.

Young Gabriel jumped up as a fast launch swept past in chase of a rowing eight, sculling at a terrific rate, the crews’ adrenaline sparked by the speed at which they rowed apparently multiplied by the four knots of ebb tide racing down. At something like fifteen miles per hour they careered past. The sun dipped below the trees, the sky a dark red, black clouds gathering. The first spatter of rain presaged a storm. Gabriel began to run home.

Gabriel fought hard for his moments of solitude. The music that sometimes filled his head was intoxicating to him. There would be no warning when the harmonic storm might begin; and because rapture quickly followed, Gabriel could be embarrassed in front of his friends as his eyelids flickered and he showed the whites of his eyes. Some adults feared he was on the verge of a fit, older children suspected he was playing a game. But inside Gabriel’s head it was that most extraordinary music that distracted him.

There is a difference between the inspired composer and the skilled orchestrator. A good orchestrator can sit with sheets of manuscript and, as the arrangement develops, can read the notes and actually hear a phantom orchestra in his head. But an inspired composer hears music in his mind so complex, so diverting, that any attempt to write it down seems facile. What this kind of visitation produces in the subject is a desire to rediscover what has been heard before.

As a child, my own entry into the world of music had been through the acquisition of a number of mouth organs I purchased with my pocket money. Later came the obligatory guitars and finally the art-school course in mental deconstruction that led me to this curious place I now inhabit. I have been famous. I feel sure of that. But I can’t quite remember at this precise moment whether I achieved

recognition as a composer of music or as some kind of futurist seer. Certainly, my mind caved in at some point. All I care about now - and 'now' for the duration of this narrative, and to root myself somewhere in the present millennium, is a period that straddles the years between 2003 and 2035, my years of *incarceration*, or *asylum*, or *protected retirement* - is what outsiders might call meditation. Although to them it might appear to be nothing of the kind: during these events I seem to be mad. But, triggered by Gabriel's transmissions, and the echoes of his imagined music, I can re-run at will memories of entire detailed episodes of our shared childhood past.

As Gabriel reached his home in King Edwards Gardens the rain increased. A massive clap of thunder provided the perfect climatic tutti to the symphony he had been enjoying in his head as he ran home. The tempo of the final movement synchronised with his thudding feet. The thunder brought Josh to the window of the apartment above, and Gabriel looked up and waved.

'Hiya Josh,' he mouthed silently. 'See you tomorrow.'

He knew that his best friend had a special ceremony the following day.

The two boys lived in a suburban Acton street with semi-detached houses built around 1850. Had they been undivided they would have been quite grand. Through the front door one entered a hall that took advantage of the two storeys with a wide staircase to the right. Gabriel's family lived on the ground-floor. Upstairs Josh lived with his devout, though not strictly orthodox, Jewish parents. Josh's young, handsome Uncle Hymie lived in the apartment too. Some people took Josh and Hymie for brothers, this illusion was impacted by the way Josh's mother Myrna doted on her young brother in public. Josh's father Morry was some kind of salesman for hair products (Josh was never certain what he sold). His travels took him abroad often. For Myrna it was enough that she had the care of these two beautiful boys, and she fretted constantly about their future. Hymie was studying for accreditation as an accountant, but Myrna hoped one day he might move into politics via the Civil Service or some role in local government. Each morning when he rose he would turn on the radio and listen to news, on Radio 1, and then without discrimination to whatever current pop music followed. Gabriel woke every day to this not so distant alarm. Pop music was not a passion of Gabriel's. Some of it was OK, but Gabriel took music to be a more serious matter than could be properly handled by men wearing too much makeup or a spitting yob wearing a dog-collar. Gabriel once suggested to Hymie that he might try listening to Radio 3 in the morning: pointing out helpfully that the programming was deliberately light at that time. Hymie just laughed and ruffled the boy's hair, knocking his borrowed skullcap askew.

Gabriel's parents were a show business couple on the lighter side, perhaps this is what made Gabriel appear to be something of a snob: he was rebelling against his parent's taste and mores? As I look down from the ether at these eccentric individuals, I am struck by certain similarities to my own childhood. My parents though were not both musicians. My mother Rosalynd was a singer. But my father Jack Highsmith was a conjuror, a member of the Magic Circle, bound by a sworn and solemn vow not to reveal how he produced his rabbit from a hat. They had been teenagers during the last war and met performing at Variety concerts. Even before that big bomb in Japan had finally ended war on such a scale forever, I landed strange parents for my idyll on earth as a spiritual seeker and self-immolating religious flagellant. They were from the liberating era of Swing. As the war ended they celebrated with the romantic ballads and uplifting foxtrots of the pre-war years. The loose, super-cool languidness of Glen Miller arrangements filled the air around me, a bemused little boy. I remember my father repeating the old show-biz adage that *The Show Must Go On* when his little rabbit was sick. Even as a child I realised that rapidly fading performers in show-business like my father needed humility to accept their position low on the bill, but manifested an almost insane arrogance when faced with the possibility of their failure to appear. In the case of my father, if he failed to appear it was usually because the *bloody* rabbit was sick again. *I must go on. Each of us must play our part. The audience have paid for their tickets, they deserve a jolly good show. Not everyone has come to see bloody Lita Roza!* And soon, as a result of this philosophy, I found myself alone. Or at least, that is the way it felt.

Gabriel's parents were better prepared for parenthood. They too had been quite young when Gabriel was born, and had found his delightful maiden aunt Trilby invaluable as a surrogate carer when they were on tour. Some of their recordings had sold quite well and they often appeared on TV and radio. They were known as 'Donnie and Connie'. He played guitar, she piano (or electric organ when they appeared in clubs or undertook residencies in holiday camps or went off on long cruises). Strange, that even from my ghostly position up in the non-existent ether I would not have completely accepted the Eastern idea that we each choose our own parents from some high-aspect, well-informed and impartial grandstand viewpoint of humanity undertaken with the advice of angels on the Astral Plane. I would have thought, with what was once a definitive drunk's hiccup, that it was all *bollocks*, despite my present weightless, alcohol-free, egoless predisposition. And if Gabriel had actually chosen his parents (in the manner and method I earlier suggested, that is most often offered by New Age apologists for child-abuse of all kinds in contemporary liberal society) perhaps all that had gone wrong was that, after the heavenly auditions, the two promising young musicians – both finely talented and possibly gifted –

chosen to be targeted by the as yet unborn Gabriel, fell far too symbiotically and sycophantically in love when they found each other. For they sacrificed everything extraordinary they might have achieved as individuals in order to remain together at all times. In so doing, they ensured that their son would sense their unintentional neglect as a by-product of their obsessive love, and, thus, he would make up his mind never so to fall.

Gabriel was not unhappy. His parents, like my own, exalted the paying audience over their own parental obligations, but knew how to express passion, love and humour. He learned something important from them about serving others. And, after all, after everything, the genes they passed on enabled Gabriel to hear music so divine, so powerful, so dense, rich, pure, distorted and wild that it often filled his eyes with tears as he fell to his knees with the natural, grateful joy of being young and alive.