

## Chapter Four: I Heard Voices

What lay ahead, somewhere, at some distant time, was Gabriel's present sojourn in the Vox-Box, rattling at my ethereal meditations; his childhood may compare to my own, but he has travelled a different path to come to this empty, misty place. In this place, Gabriel's voice is deep, distinguished, worn and resigned.

'You heard conversations.'

Josh had heard voices even as Myrna pulled at his lapels trying to ready him to become Bar Mitzvah that afternoon in 1975.

'Had you overheard Jahveh from the Torah, speaking to Job? Or had He been speaking directly to you, Josh? I know you hadn't wanted to hear from Him, not really. You always said that God had got it wrong again, in the war.'

Josh's soprano voice rang out in the synagogue, made the more frail when the robust, kind and powerful voice of the Cantor took over. Every young Jew by the seventies knew precisely what had happened in 1944 in Germany and Poland. They knew why Israel existed, why Palestine had been annexed, why Jews were powerful, clever, loved, lauded, despised and hated. But Josh heard voices, and to those - for his Bar Mitzvah - he added his own. His singing voice was a beautiful, plaintive soprano. While he sang, what to him were certainly not meaningless Hebrew tracts (he loved Hebrew, and eagerly studied Yiddish too), he made his complaint to God Himself:

'What happened to my people in the war was wrong, a mistake. Words - well, in the Torah You used them pretty carelessly - so words don't intimidate me. So I will become a poet.'

As the Cantor intoned, and Myrna wept from the gallery, he composed line after line - or was he hearing rather than composing? Unlike Gabriel, Josh's gift was something of an affliction. Not for him the anonymous instruments of the orchestra. He heard voices that he had come to recognise, they had become familiar to him. And somehow he knew that some of the voices he heard were from the past, some were from the present, and one in particular seemed to come from the future. It was the voice of that old man, gruff, who spoke slowly and pedantically as though to an audience of fools or lip-readers.

Old Gabriel is not the one I have been longing for. Not the One. But when Gabriel wants to come into the ether there is nothing I can do to stop him. But now for the moment there is silence. I am not particularly high now; the babble of disembodied voices, the Rabelaisian sexual depravity of the abused, the cacophony of the so-called music of a billion undeveloped minds - all this is too close at hand for comfort. And yet it is not concentration that keeps me in this now tranquil place, it is grace. I feel that when I reach this state I am simply being permitted it, I haven't earned it at all. So I cannot complain, but as the remembered sound of a child begins to distract me, in a cosmic world of slow breaths and imperceptible, yearning exhalations, the exasperation of my gasp is clearly audible.

At first, all I can hear across time is the sound of a three year old girl crying. The year was 1967. That was the year I went to Calcutta and first met my lifetime guru Bollo. In that year the streets of the city had been littered with children sleeping in groups by the railway tracks, abandoned by mothers who had been abandoned by men, with whom they'd slept purely to get a meal to feed the child that would soon sleep by the railway tracks.....

The child I could hear didn't cry with any particular anguish; for it was not alone on the streets in India. Her father's gentle cooing soothed and placated her. A good thing, for she was surrounded by wailing women. The women's heads were covered and some wore masks over their faces, some just covered their mouths as they clung onto each other for support as they gazed down into the muddy hole in the ground into which garlands and rose petals were being tossed. After a few moments Leila stopped crying. She looked at her father's face. Damoo was not a handsome man, but he was calm, distinguished and - to his little three year old daughter in his arms, who had just buried a mother she had hardly had time to come to know- he was an angel.

Gabriel's rotund voice, steady and defiant as a shunting engine on railway tracks, draws me from the future - or the past - back to the non-existent present in the non-existent ether.

'From when she was very small.'

Says the barrel-toned voice.

'She had no mum. She was envious of other kids, but she always said that her dad was wonderful. She idolised him. Was that a good thing?'

As Gabriel speaks, droning incessantly through the mist, his words trigger something. *'Was that a good thing?'* I remember how much I had loved pop music. What does that have to do with Gabriel's memories of this girl intruding into my reverie? Suddenly it happens. The sweeping sound of Abba's "SOS" soars across the ether in multi-coloured sheets. Junk. Sublime. And it works like sublime junk, it fills the gaping hole in my solar plexus. Is this my favourite song? Will it soothe my irritated, subverted spirit? Can I retarget and refocus my meditative energy? No. But no matter. I am impatient with all that Kundalini stuff, but I know that when my beloved is near, that hole in the lower middle of my chest begins to fill. Only then can I rest. Only then do I feel truly at peace.

When I had first heard this song - could it have been 1975? - it had transported me. A little drunk perhaps, I had not known I needed to be taken further out of myself until the music took me. It was a perfect moment. And in the three and a half minutes while the song played on the car radio I felt time had stopped.

Since then, whenever I hear that song, I remember that feeling of weightless, timeless security. Carried by some higher power, by some cosmic shuttle to a safe place. And the descent from that plane is never sudden. What does a great pop song like that do? How does it do it? Why does it do it for some people but not for others? What connects fans gene for gene and homogenises them to make one particular piece of sublime junk a hit while another simply fails to attach itself to any part of the present and is quickly swept away into the multicoloured detritus of the past?

Some great American drunk - was it that fellow (a literary master) who died of first-degree burns as he lay against pipes in a stupor in his Algonquin Hotel bathroom, and when the steam-heat came on in the morning was literally burned to death? - that great drunk William Faulkner it was indeed who said *there is no past*. So true for failed pop music. But for successful pop music there is no time. It is almost beatific by nature, a practical example of *nirvana*.

When Leila first heard the song in 1975 she was eleven, and about to set herself free. She remembered freedom then. Gabriel, on and on and on from his Vox-Box, remembers what the others remember.....

'She told us that when she was a little girl she could fly'.

'I was a beautiful bird. I flew with Allah's angels. I had no idea my father and grandmother could not

see what I could do, or see what I could see. But I knew I was special. I knew that whatever I wanted to do, whatever I dreamed of, I could make happen'.

'When no one could see her she would roll from her bed and float down onto the floor. Lying face down, she flapped her arms like wings and swooped out of her bedroom, along the upstairs hall, down the stairs for her breakfast.'

Leila lived in Hillcrest Road which connected to King Edwards Gardens. Damoo was not a wealthy man, but he had a good job and had borrowed enough money to buy the whole house in which his family lived in 1975. His mother was a very strict Muslim. Born in Persia, long before it became Iran, she nonetheless saw herself as a North Kashmiri woman. She had been brought up in a little hill village that was predominantly Zoroastrian, generally called 'Parsi' - but Muslims were respected, as were the nutty, open-minded Sufis and even the few Sikhs who still had the courage to try to coexist there.

Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were known to geographical journalists as 'The Stans'. As a suffix -stan simply means place, but it came from the Persian. Persian had been the courtly language of the entirety of Central Asia, and the imperiousness of the various scholarly Ayatollahs who created Iran was to some extent underwritten by the knowledge that few 'Stans' would challenge Persia's right to be the first to redefine and re-root Islam. Persia, India, China, and all the 'Stans' (including Pakistan) threw up the most complex religious patchwork seen anywhere on earth. More religious movements, leaders, yogis, saints, Mullahs, Christs, Avatars, Gurus and Elephant Gods proliferated this admittedly large, mountainous region than seemed possible. I know that the ether I visit floats somewhere over, above, below or between northern Persia and Maharashtra in India. It was and still is an electrified part of the globe.

Damoo had grown up in Acton in a street near the house he later purchased for his family in Hillcrest Road. The young beauty Damoo had taken for a bride had been a frail woman. Damoo's mother had tried to warn her own husband against the match, but it had been made by various elders who came to visit from the mosque in Hayes and there was little could be done to change things. Damoo, in any case, had been stricken. His bride had been exotically lovely, intelligent and - to her credit - a devout woman. But her pregnancy had seen her fall to every complication possible. She had quickly become unbearably dependent, and - since her daughter-in-law's death - Damoo's mother prayed fervently every morning that Allah would remove from her mind, and forgive her forever, for her constant satisfaction

that this complicated and glamorous woman was gone.

Damoo had known me of course. He had been a local boy, and although we didn't attend the same school, we occasionally ran into each other. Damoo was two years younger than I, and it was years until he learned my name, but we had shyly smiled at each other when we passed. He had later been, like other local acquaintances of mine, bemused to find I had become a new celebrity. Even later he read that I was a 'star', and I had been one of those who had, as a young man in the late sixties, found a teacher I believed was the new Christ. I had attempted to disseminate my guru's message.

"Reincarnation. From the first breath of God, that first whim of Infinite Nothing to know itself, sprung the creation that led to human consciousness. Bollo teaches that it is consciousness itself that evolves - not matter. From nothing to gas, from gas to vapour, from vapour to soil, from soil to worm, from worm to bird, from bird to dog, from dog to man, from man to woman, from woman to man, from man to woman ad infinitum until some divine grace intervenes and the consciousness of the soul in cycle is released from evolution to what Bollo calls 'involution'. And the population of earth is growing exponentially. Not because of all those worms on their way to be men, but because life-forms from other planets come here to earth. Bollo teaches that it is only here on earth that consciousness can end its endless cycle of evolution and begin to 'involve'?" Ray High. Rolling Stone magazine. 1975.

It was simpler to be a Muslim in Acton in 1975 than it had been for his mother twenty-eight years earlier in Iran. Damoo was happy to be a Muslim. Order. Discipline. Prayer. The annual Hajj. Devotion was simple - obedience and self-sacrifice. Some of what Bollo taught seemed to Damoo to dimly echo the teachings of Mohammed. But this reincarnation thing, it was troubling. Leaving aside the souls coming to earth from other planets, if the population continually increased, and those who were swelling the ranks of souls waiting, longing for involution - longing to begin to undertake the journey back to God - if those souls were all 'new' to the path, then surely common sense would reveal that a high proportion of those being born on this planet, especially those refreshing the already uncountable numbers, if those souls were 'new', then they were all closer to dogs than God. It would explain a lot about the state of the human race.

I, impudently occupying the ether in my old age - and how old am I now? Ninety? Six thousand and ninety? - have no idea whether I am evolving or involving. I just know I feel closer to God in the ether

than in my own rattling, damaged brain. I once behaved like a man recently reincarnated from a dog. Even now, my occasional rages cause me to be *locked down* in my room - or is it a cell? - I shit on my own bed and drink my own urine. But at other times I exhibit the attributes of a yogi: I can go without food for a month, without water for several days. I once stood on one leg in my room for thirty-eight days. Useful tricks. Damoo? We only had been distant friends at first, but in 1972 we went into business together. There were very few like Damoo in the little Acton enclave where we all grew up. There were a number of Jewish families, some of them war émigrés from Poland or even Russia. There were the first few families from India and Pakistan too, though they quickly began to move closer to where the first mosques and temples were built on the industrial spaces near Southall, Hayes, Uxbridge. Damoo would be surprised to know where I now spend my days, and that sometimes I look down at my childhood acquaintance. Or do I look up?