

## Chapter 5 - I Could Fly

Damoo was dressed like Elvis. His mother was listening to the radio that seemed to be playing the soundtrack to a Bollywood movie. Damoo and Leila were dancing like fifties' beboppers to Eddie Cochran's 'Three Steps To Heaven'. Damoo swung Leila through the air, her arms open wide, her hair flowing back. He put her down and picked up a large bodied, ornate Höfner guitar and began to strum quite proficiently.

'I look just like Eddie! Mother, you made a very good outfit for me.'

'No dad,' teased Leila. 'You look like Elvis. And I'm just like Ann-Margret – I'm blond, pretty with huge .....

'It's enough you are pretty, like Ann-Margret. Let's leave it there.'

Damoo leans his guitar against a chair, and collapses into it, breathless. Leila looks worried, but the moment of doubt passes as Damoo leaps to his feet again.

'Now dance baby!'

Leila and her dad had many such silly, happy times. It was at these moments that Leila realised that the rules were going to be different for her. She could be Muslim, but maybe she could be something more.

'I was a beautiful bird. I knew I could fly. I could do anything I dreamed of.'

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The three children were drawn together slowly. Gabriel and Josh, living in the same house, were not automatically 'best' friends, but they often played together. It was through a series of shared traumas that they became truly close. And of course the pair of them, boys of thirteen, found it hard to admit that Leila, just eleven, and a Muslim to boot, held any fascination for them.

Leila wore her head fully covered, her grandmother ensuring she kept her shawl on at all times when she was playing in the street by providing her with the glamorous close-fitting black version worn by the fashionable young Muslim ladies of Lahore art-college in Pakistan. She wore a well-cut shift dress,

often in dark brown or black, with neat pedal-pusher leggings beneath. She always looked chic; always dressed in a manner appropriate to Islam. Josh as a Jew, wore his Yarmulke skull-cap on every occasion that demanded or begged one. As I described in the account of his Bar Mitzvah, and his argument with God, he read Hebrew quite well, and could speak a little.

Gabriel was a typical post-Christian misfit. His parents knew no God other than that one they prayed to for a full-house, or that they smugly thanked for their own bountiful gifts of talent. Show business had its own church, chapel and mode of worship. Some, like my father, worshipped rabbits and prayed only for their continuing good health that they might never prevent the show - in which though important they must nonetheless disappear - from going on. *The show must go on*. The day had long since passed when theatres were closed on the Sabbath. In any case, what self-respecting (even God-fearing) musician or stage actor – of whatever religion, cast or creed – would dare to suggest the show could not go on for some reason as zany as the requirement of worship? After all, when two or three *showbiz-troupeurs* are gathered in *His name, He will be there*. And musicians too believed they gathered to make music in *His name*. Thespians hoped that *He Himself* was behind them in their selfless and brilliant portrayals, and before them in the humble audience. The three children may have been from different worlds, but that could not stop whatever divine plan or karmic spider's-web entangled them.

‘Oh God,’ whispered Josh as he and Gabriel tried to squeeze unseen down the street and away, aware that the group of girls nearby had stopped skipping. ‘There’s that girl whose dad thinks he’s Elvis or someone.’

‘Eddie Cochran,’ Gabriel corrected. ‘He wrote ‘*Summertime Blues*’. God, she’s gorgeous. Don’t look at her.’

And so it was in the time-honoured manner of pretending to ignore one another that these boys and this girl slowly came to attract each other.

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Gabriel’s Aunt Trilby had never been married. She had some men friends, and though attractive was not a great beauty. Her blonde hair was a little lanky, her teeth a little uneven and protruding, and they were not a good colour (she was a smoker). Gabriel did not welcome his Aunt’s kisses and must have made his distaste obvious enough, for eventually she desisted from pulling him to her to embrace him. She

was older than her brother Donnie by a good few years, no one was quite sure how old in fact she was. She had lived in the loft room of her parents' flat (Donnie's parents too of course). She was qualified as a piano teacher, at least to the level that would take her students to music college, if not some great and discriminating Academy. Her own playing was inexpert, but she had an excellent musical grounding and a good ear. She tuned her piano herself, and had done so for many years. The faithful old English piano, with its effective German action, was tempered so beautifully that harmonies sprang from it that sounded as precise and exact as those of a concert grand twice its size.

When Donnie and Connie began to tour the country when Gabriel was about four and a half, and finally went off on their sometimes long winter cruises, her occasional baby-sitting duties elongated and finally – looking after Gabriel's needs more-or-less full-time - she went to the unusual step of having her upright piano moved from her room at her parents' to Gabriel's home in King Edwards Gardens. This required the services of four men, so powerful and serene in their physical strength – that they appeared to exert little effort getting her piano down two narrow turning flights of stairs, then one extremely long one to the ground from the second storey of the flat over a shop. Trilby was not without her sparkle, and one of the men offered to take her to the cinema once he had nestled the piano carefully against the wall in her new bedroom. Trilby shyly declined his offer. Later, the gentle removal man could be heard musing over his pint exactly which star of Hollywood she took herself to be. In fact she identified with Marilyn Monroe, who famously fell in love with the distinguished and literary Arthur Miller, a Jew. Trilby was psychic. Not to the point of being able to predict the future, but enough to sense deep down that there was something – some person – waiting there who would improve her life.

Her regular and permanent presence in his life transformed Gabriel's moods from the extreme and contradictory of his infancy to the calmness, certitude and orderliness he displayed as a young teen. As a baby his mother had taken him with them on their travels and Gabriel had grown up in and around the proverbial Trunks of show business, as had many circus children before him. But as has been already observed, Donnie and Connie loved each other too obsessively and needily to learn to adore another creature, even their own son. And it became clear to everyone, that when Trilby came into Gabriel's life, as he started school regularly at five years' old, he began to know what real love was. A kindly word as he awoke on a cold winter's morning; a gentle hug ten minutes before he needed to rise for school; a delicious, simple cooked breakfast waiting for him when he came down blearily to the kitchen; a fresh comic to read, or at worst the cut-out comic strips from Trilby's daily newspaper; all

this made Gabriel's daily life feel enhanced with love.

By the time he was five and a half he was, after six months in her care, a piano virtuoso on a par with the young Mozart. Was that really possible? Of course not, but it is how musical affairs appeared to have developed to young Gabriel himself. Banging incessantly at three keys on the piano, usually the A below middle C with his left index finger, and adjacent D and E just above middle C with two fingers of his right hand, Gabriel held the loud pedal down hard. Suddenly, he moved all his fingers down a tone, the prevailing key then B flat. Trilby's glorious little piano then began to echo and sing like the choirs of Solomon.

Glory. Gabriel heard not only the heavenly angelic choirs of the disembodied seraphims and cherubims who frolicked in the white cumuli above, but also the massive organs of universal space itself, and the zinging vibratoless and even modulations of air, liquid and wire that sounded like a million fiddlers; he heard too the fanfares of trumpets that a mortal only heard once in any lifetime – and that only, as in death, when the soul in transit approached the mirrored gates of judgement he or she themselves constructed to impede or smooth their way to heavenly peace ahead.

I can sense your suspicion. You think I am describing something I myself experienced, and that I have invented Gabriel, and exaggerated his gifts in order to exalt myself; a kind of masterful double bluff. As a child I did experience something a little like Gabriel did as he banged his piano. But I had no such beloved, benevolent and indulgent Aunt. Most musicians will understand that music is first discovery and then a trigger to another world. But I go to great lengths to describe what I could only hear in my imagination, in the ether. What Gabriel heard was real. Can any of us ever grasp the magnitude of that?

In the ether I can sense the assembled angels awaiting the next great Harvest listening enthralled to the beautiful music this ritual still engenders in young Gabriel's mind, echoing through the clouds until this very moment sixty-seven years later. When I first found myself in the lower regions of the ether, I realised that much of the most enthralling stuff to be heard up there, floating around like astral trash, had come from the extraordinarily imaginative mind of the young Gabriel. In my early days in the ether I was in better contact with my own heart; colour, scent and music filled my aspirant's meditations then. But the music Gabriel heard himself—a small boy, feet firmly on the planet earth, fingers solidly connected to three piano keys, the rhythm of his infantile and repetitive banging uneven and clumsy—that music was divine. And still is now.

What Gabriel heard connected him easily and simply with this very same place in astral paradise that I have had to struggle to attain through agonies of trauma, pain, abuse, immolation and intense years of isolated and lonely meditation.

*This is heavenly hell*

*I appear insane*

*I have no idea*

*Who there is to blame.....*

Chaos? Not at all. What Gabriel heard was rhythmic and ordered, like his new life with Aunt Trilby. If distortion, deconstruction and destabilisation were to come, they would come later. And as the boy heard the triumphant, clashing, vigorous and splashing orchestral groups interweaving each other, sparking and igniting fireworks of sound and passion, bringing helpless tears to the eyes of this important and unique little child, his aunt would temporarily stop her clicking needles. And, as her nephew ended what she had heard as an endless repetition of dissonant banging on her precious piano, and suddenly, triumphantly finished his piece and looked over proudly at her, she would beam at him.

‘That’s lovely dear,’ she would say. ‘Really beautiful.’

And before she could resume her knitting, he would respond solemnly:

‘I know.’