

Chapter 6 - Ikapikapoo

In my mind several *rememberings* (sic) are conspiring at once for my attention: my own past; the infancy of little Gabriel, not yet truly precocious, merely indulged and encouraged by his aunt; the voice of old man Gabriel, now audible only from within the absurd, multi-coloured and irritatingly intrusive Vox-Box that floats in my sublime curving sheets of space like effluent flotsam on a clear blue beach; the teenaged children, passing from puberty to adolescence and trawling with them as much of the psychological detritus of their infancy as they could carry.

‘Josh’

Gabriel’s gruff old man’s voice coming from inside the Vox-Box sounds dull against the reverberations of the ether.

‘My Aunt Trilby. Do you remember her?’

In Trilby’s room at Gabriel’s house eight years later, the boy – by then thirteen – finally asked Trilby to teach him to play the piano properly. For his aunt, who had endured the cacophonous pomposity of her beloved nephew for so long she hardly heard it anymore, this came as the moment for which she had prayed. In her psychic nature, there had been the most irresistible feeling that Gabriel was truly a special being: he was a prodigy. Without anything but her unconditional praise Gabriel was now able to coax from her humble upright piano the most astonishingly rapid, complex and challenging musical displays. She was convinced that nothing he played could ever be transcribed, and she also knew that what he played did not stand alone: it complemented, underpinned or decorated in some way what he heard in his head. He would sit poised for a few minutes, his hands in his lap, his head dropped, eyes shut, as he meditated and prepared to play. Then, it was clear he would hear something. His face would fill with light, and he would begin.

Within a few months of Trilby starting formal lessons for Gabriel he was playing the organ, two manuals and pedals and all, each morning for the Christian assembly at school. Two evenings a week, when the school day was over, Trilby stayed on with Gabriel to help him tackle the well-known organ pieces by Bach and Messiaen. They also took advantage of the school’s presentable grand piano, a new seven foot six inch Yamaha. Gabriel began to extemporise in the middle of a particularly ominous fugue, and it was only after a minute or two that Trilby realised. What Gabriel played was dark,

portentous and disturbing. I still hear this particular music in the ether, for Gabriel had been composing *his own death mass* – a piece he knew must deeply penetrate the ascendant heavens if it was to set his soul free.

Sometimes Josh sat in the hall to listen proudly to his friend. Once, Leila peeped through the door with her friend Dotty. Dotty played the violin to grade 5 and felt Gabriel's sudden rise to celebrity status was undeserved.

‘There is only one God’,

Josh said quietly, almost to himself as he sat in the very back of the large school assembly hall, the entire room shaking as Gabriel pedalled at the deepest notes.

‘His name is Jahveh, His name is Jesus.’

Josh was a solemn fellow. But when he and Gabriel read his poetry together, or attempted to turn it into song, life seemed lighter. Gabriel heard his friend reciting and stopped playing to join in with the poetry.

‘His name is Allah,’ they sang together. ‘His name is Bruce and Bono, His name is Ikapikapoo.’

Trilby looked sternly at them as they collapsed in laughter at their childish attempts at blasphemy. But she could see, as only she of all the adults in their lives could see, that there was some great creative generation beginning between the boys.

There is only one God

His name is Jahveh

His name is Jesus

His name is Allah

His name is Bruce and Bono

His name is Ikapikapoo

Up in my ether, where serenity has yet again been interrupted by this reinspection of my solitude, and the thudding of a tennis ball against the neighbouring wall, the organ music ends, the boys' laughter fades, and the moist, warm evening reddened and finally closes in, to black.

A new dawn on the ethereal beach, the sun rises - red to white.

‘Your parents lived upstairs in the house of my parents.’

Gabriel’s old buzz-saw voice escapes from the Vox-Box.

‘Passover was a grand affair up there. Great cooking smells. Latke. Chicken soup - the chicken cooked whole. Gefilte Fish. I used to enjoy the leftover treats. I can never separate my love of you Jews from my love of your food. No one I knew made any sense of what had happened to the Jews in the war. Or the first West Bank troubles. You know - you were my best friend. You carried some great darkness in your soul. Your eyes shone. Beauty and pain. To me, you really did seem to be one of God’s own. “Chosen.”’

Gabriel’s voice courses down on sheaves of static from the future. There can be no certainty he ever makes a clear connection.

In the street outside the house Gabriel and Josh would try to entertain Leila and some of her friends. They mucked about, as boys do, believing that the foolishness of a thirteen year old would impress itself on the precocious heart of an eleven year old girl, who - in her mind - was already an adult, causing men to swoon as she passed, and many of them did turn to catch a glimpse of the extraordinary girl dressed as she was so exotically, her head high, proud and beautiful like a predatory animal.

‘Bubbles in the morning,’ Josh sang. He had a good voice. ‘Bubbles late at night. Bubbles make you crazy. Bubbles make you fight.’

Gabriel strummed a little ukulele for accompaniment. The children all laughed. It seemed at last that Leila and the boys would be friends.

‘Did you really write that song?’ she asked. Sidling close to Josh who cast down his eyes shyly.

‘I wrote the music,’ cut in Gabriel. ‘Josh wrote the words.’

‘Well it’s crap,’ laughed Leila as she and her friends ran off.

‘It’s about drugs,’ shouted Gabriel hoping to redeem the nursery rhyme.

‘I thought it was quite good really’ said Dotty breathlessly as she and Leila ran laughing.

‘So did I, said Leila. ‘But I’m not going to let them know I’m impressed.’

Leila had been struck more by the boys’ friendship than the silly song. She and Dotty were friends, but they didn’t write songs together, they didn’t ever do anything constructive together at all. They gossiped. They smoked. They fantasized about boys so old that were their fantasies to come true the boys in question would go to prison as child-molesters. Leila was envious of the way Gabriel and Josh already seemed to exhibit evidence of some master plan.

When Gabriel was eleven his love of the river had drawn him almost every evening to the spot on the Kew bank of the Thames looking over at Brentford Lock. Sometimes when the music he expected to hear didn’t come, he would walk instead up and down the towpath, sometimes apprehended by the lonely men who stalked the area near and under the bridge in the mistaken belief that they might not look like perverts as long as they kept walking. Many of them were young gay men waiting for another of their persuasion. Some were glue-sniffers, others exhibitionists pulling down their trousers to female cyclists or joggers. Gabriel once saw a powerful young woman stop jogging and push one of the inept flashers towards the river. His trousers impeded him as he tried to gain his balance, he slid slowly and helplessly down the muddy, cobbled ramp of the bank until, finally, he slid momentarily under the water. Gabriel looked for the girl, but she’d gone. He ran to a life-ring he knew was near the bridge and threw it down to the man who grabbed it. But the halyard had been cut short by some vandal and Gabriel couldn’t pull the ridiculous man in. He floated off towards Chiswick, his trousers still snagged somewhere on the bank.

Sometimes he would see the Sea Scouts who’d come from their shed on the Brentford bank, round the Eyot in their ex-ship’s lifeboat. It looked very jolly. They wore smart seaman’s outfits, with blue jerseys and blue and white caps. Against the tide the coxswain would run an old, noisy outboard-motor and the young cadets would hold their oars upright. That was impressive. As they swept down with the tide they would turn off the motor and row sedately, sometimes singing some corny shanty or other. Gabriel

decided one day to join the troop and began to make enquiries. Phil, a friend at school who played a bit of guitar, was a member and introduced him. Gabriel's father met the Commodore and then once a week Gabriel went after school to the ramshackle shed at Brentford that served as their base.

There was a lot of fiddling with rope, making knots and fixings. And there was instruction in rowing. Visits to various maritime museums were promised but never materialised. Gabriel started to become bored, especially when he was informed he could not have a uniform until his full initiation. This required him to take a boat trip, and the next trip was scheduled for a high tide on a forthcoming 'bunkhouse weekend'. Gabriel's father was concerned about letting his son go off to spend the night in the care of a couple of ex-sailors and said so. Gabriel was frantic to be allowed to go, and arranged for the Mate to come and meet his father. The men had an uneasy conversation. Nonetheless, he allowed Gabriel to go.

'Right! Boys and men of Brentford Sea Scouts Troop,'

The Commodore had the voice of a West Country gardener rather than a sailor. He chewed down on his consonants like a man with no teeth.

'Today, we are going to use the launch to study the tides. Pose for a photo first. Coxain!

The camera! Straighten up lads. That's good. Done? Right, climb aboard.'

The photo taken, the boys climbed aboard and he continued his entreaties.

'In you get, steady as she goes. Nothing to be afraid of. Life-jackets on everyone? Good.'

Gabriel took a seat at the stern of the boat nearest the engine, he was not allowed an oar, and so had little to do but observe. The Commodore and the Mate pushed the launch over the pliant mud and into the stream. Jumping aboard, the Mate pulled the cord on the old outboard and it roared into life, reaching a steady, monotonous whine almost immediately.

After just a few moments the drone of the engine had sparked the most extraordinary cascades of harmonics in Gabriel's fertile imagination. The music he heard on that boat trip was the most perfect, the most sublime he would ever hear. He lost all sense of time. He never wanted the moment to pass, and in delirium had no sense that it might. The mud, broken trees and derelict buildings in the back channel behind the Eyot, as the launch plugged desperately slowly against the flooding tide, seemed to Gabriel like paradise. He began to see angels massed both in the sky and along the surface of the water.

They were shapeless beings, grey in the autumn dusk, with glints of gold sheen that betrayed their heavenly provenance. In the corner of his eye, he noticed a group of angels standing on the shore of the Eyot itself. They were women, their lower bodies smeared into the muddy soil where the swans, geese and coots had built their otherwise precarious nests safe from human interference, and their breasts were exposed. They were old women, with huge bosoms hanging low to their waists. Among them though, darting between them, were what looked like fairies, huge creatures, with no breasts at all, but large pretty heads. And as they ran in and out of the groups of angelic hags, Gabriel saw that the fairies were flashing their genitals at him like the glue-sniffers on the riverbank. The Mate, acting as coxswain, did not fail to notice that the boy beside him had lost consciousness. He also noticed the boy's erection.

'I'm feeling a bit strange,' muttered Gabriel, and no one heard.

'That boy is ill, he's passing out, hold on to him or he'll go over the side.'

The Commodore walked back down the launch and gripped Gabriel's legs. As he held the boy steady he looked up at the Mate controlling the engine. The pair of them did not smile, one of them fingered the camera, and in their eyes they each recognised the beginning of a predatory spark that would brook no opposition.