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Days from a Different World

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Sun rises, 4.59 a.m.; sets, 9.11 p.m.
Lighting-up time: 9.41 p.m.
Maximum temperature, 70°F; minimum, 53°F.
Rainfall: nil.
Sunshine: 6.3 hours.
Light southerly winds, occasional cloud thinning by late morning.

THE ROW HAS gone on all night.

I must have slept through most of it, though I am faintly aware of what has happened when my mother climbs into my little bed with its springs and its flock mattress. The bed is precarious and inclined to tip, yet everything is remarkably satisfactory once we have established a mutually comfortable position, her arm around me, her quiet breathing in my ear. Protection, certainty, peace.

'Is everything all right?'

'Yes, darling, of course it is. Don't wake Daddy.'

'And will we all go to the Festival tomorrow?'

'Everything will be fine.'

That doesn't quite seem to be an answer, but I am too sleepy to divine it.

'Just go back to sleep. I'll sing you a little song.'

She whispers it in my ear:

> Oh, my babby,
> My curly-headed babby,
> Your daddy's in the cotton-fields,
> Workin' hard at noon.
>
> It's toora-loola, toora-loola, babby,
> In your mammy's arms be creepin',
> An' soon you'll be a-sleepin',
> Toora-loora-loora-loora-loora bye.

I drift back to sleep. Everything will be fine.

When I wake, the sun is streaming through the skylight

above the bed and the row has started up again: about things that have happened, things that have been said to other people, about promises made and broken. Every row is the same, and goes over the same ground. And again and again the words are the same too.

'You're just impossible. Impossible.'

'And you're just stupid. I don't know what you're doing here with Johnny and me.'

'Neither do I. I must be crazy to stay with you. Not with Johnny.'

'You're certainly crazy. Why don't you just leave, like you always do?'

'Yes, I'm going to. Directly I can. And don't think I'll come back again.'

'So you always say, but you always bloody come creeping back here. And then you start your screaming set-outs.'

'If it wasn't for Johnny—'

They both hush their voices then, as though to mention me is to usher me into their troubles, while the rest of their shouting has had nothing to do with me whatsoever.

If I spent more time around other kids, I would recognize the pattern with much greater clarity. As it is, these are the only words of anger I regularly hear; and no one is ever angry with me. I am clearly the cause of all this fighting, because my name is always raised at some point, yet they always seem anxious to tell me I am not to blame. I am the onlooker, outside it all and yet horribly, disturbingly involved.

'I'm not going to that stupid Festival with you.'

'Well, that's good at any rate. Johnny and I can have a decent time on our own there in that case.'

'And I'm certainly not coming to that dreadful, absurd church of yours, with all those women in their stupid hats.'

'They look a damned sight better than you do, with or without a hat. And it's not absurd, it's a demonstrable science.'

She snorts with disgust. 'Hocus-pocus, American rubbish. Those people will believe anything.'

They row about the evidences or the phoniness of Christian Science for a few more minutes.

I know I've got to reconcile them so that we can all be together. The trouble is, I don't know how to do it. There must be some formula, some spell, some words I can speak; but it won't come. I lie silently in my camp bed, looking across at them as they stand opposite each other across their double bed, fully dressed now, with their shoes on. If I can only think of the right words, everything will be all right.

Later, as my father is in the kitchen, making his coffee in the kitchen next door, I get out of bed, walk over to my mother, and try out the words I have practised in my head.

'The Festival's going to be so good. Please come with us. You don't have to come to church first – you can meet us after. And it's Daddy's birthday today. Please.'

'No, darling, I don't think I will. Daddy and I aren't getting along too well at the moment, and it's probably better if I don't.'

'But then you'll miss it. The Skylon, you know, and the Shot Tower. And the Dome of Discovery. We could all go.'

'You go and tell me all about it. Then maybe I can go with you later and you can show me.'

'No, please come now. It *is* Daddy's birthday.'

She smiles at me and brushes the hair off my forehead, and I know that I haven't found the formula at all. And as a result of my failure, everything will be spoiled. Perhaps I shouldn't have said that about the Skylon: perhaps I'm the only one who cares about it. I'm so stupid to have mentioned that. If only I could think of something else to say.

She is sitting in the kitchen, elbows on the table, as we leave, Geraldo and his Orchestra on the radio.

''Bye. Have a good time, darling. Give me a kiss.'

'Please.'

'No, darling, it's better if I stay. 'Bye, Roy.'

''Bye.'

He doesn't look at her. I do, but it's no good. The right words haven't come.

Sunday School is at Second Church of Christ, Scientist, in Notting Hill Gate: a grand, sombre building in red brick which some well-known architect based on a Byzantine model in the first years of the twentieth century. There is a dark, rather charming garden with a sundial that talks about recording only the sunny hours; only Sunday mornings at this time never seem sunny.

Inside, in the echoing, low-ceilinged basement where my rubber-soled sandals squeak on the shiny stone floor, we sit around our teacher in little chairs, listening to readings and explanations and sometimes pushing them back to stand up and sing a hymn:

> Shepherd, show me how to go,
> O'er the hillside steep;
> How to gather, how to sow,
> How to feed Thy sheep.

I stopped being a Christian Scientist decades ago, but I certainly bear it no ill-will of any kind. It was just something that happened to me for a time, a gentle, undictatorial religion with a strong emphasis on the metaphysical; no wonder Albert Einstein took a passing interest in it, and commended the writings of its founder, Mary Baker Eddy.

I gave it up because I was characteristically unwilling to accept the word of a single prophet as final on just about anything; and after many years of having no religion at all I went back to the Church of England, which had first encompassed me when I was young. In the Church of England there is very little you are required to believe, which suits me admirably; even the bishops don't always seem absolutely certain

whether God exists. I like the medieval buildings and the tombs and hearing the congregation belting out the hymns. It gives me a sense of continuity, which is about as close to godliness as I am likely to get now.

But when I was six, and later, I was very faithful to Mary Baker Eddy; and I soon knew off by heart the Scientific Statement of Being, which is the Christian Scientist's creed:

> There is no life, truth, intelligence nor substance in matter. All is infinite Mind, and its infinite manifestation, for God is All-in-all. Spirit is immortal Truth; matter is mortal error. Spirit is the real and eternal; matter is the unreal and temporal. Spirit is God, and man is His image and likeness. Therefore man is not material, he is spiritual.

You can see why this might have held a passing interest for Einstein. You can see, too, why a six-year-old, hearing words like 'manifestation', 'temporal' and 'material', might quickly grow in comprehension and vocabulary, even if he had missed an entire year of schooling. Christian Science just wasn't really for me, that's all. It wasn't for my father for very long, either; and it certainly wasn't for my mother. Brought up as a Catholic, abused as a child by some disgusting old priest, she had nothing but loathing for all religion.

Now, the Statement of Being having been intoned, the chairs squeak back for the last time and we can run around the garden until it is time to go. I have managed to tell everyone in my class, and several outside it, that we are going to the Festival of Britain today; but being mostly well-to-do kids, with expensive houses in Chelsea and Kensington, they have all been to the Festival already, and are rather superior about my excitement. I keep quiet after that, and go in search of my father, who is surrounded by a group of ladies with hats, all laughing; with one or two husbands on the periphery of the group, who don't seem to be laughing so much. It is some time before the ladies free him and leave us to find our bus.

'Thank God it's not raining. You know what day it is, don't you?'

'Your birthday.'

I've made him a card. He doesn't like people to make a fuss of his birthday, because it reminds him that he is now thirty-seven. But he also doesn't like it if they forget it.

'It's St Swithin's Day. If it rains today, it'll rain for forty days non-stop.'

'No – will it really?'

'That's what they say.'

I am disappointed now that it isn't raining: we could have tested out the theory. But at the same time I don't really want it to rain on his birthday, and I don't want it to rain on our trip to the Festival of Britain.

My father wants to give me London as an experience. I am wearing my best shoes for walking – sandals with a familiar buckle – and light clothes because the day is already warm. At the Houses of Parliament we climb unsteadily down the stairs from the upper deck, like sailors on a three-master out in the open ocean. This is a well-planned event: my father has worked out our entire journey.

His latest job, working for a market research firm, going round and asking people's opinions about different brands of washing-powder, or magazine, or political party, allows him to take time off whenever he wants, so long as he makes it up somehow. Sundays are less special to him, therefore. But this is our day, his and mine, and if only there were three of us I would be remarkably happy. I take his hand, and we walk down towards the Houses of Parliament.

He is an excellent storyteller; that is the secret of his social success. He knows how to make you laugh, but also how to catch your emotions. And he knows a lot about London.

'Can you imagine,' he is saying as we walk past the Houses of Parliament, where the work to repair the ravages of the bombing has stopped because it's Sunday, 'all the things that

happened here? Over there somewhere is where Guy Fawkes stored his barrels of gunpowder when he was going to blow up the King and the whole Parliament. That's why we have Guy Fawkes night, to celebrate when he got caught.

'That's the statue of Richard the Lionheart. When Parliament got bombed in the war, it bent his sword, and it took them ages to straighten it again.'

I would quite have liked it if it had stayed curved, like a Saracen's sword, but it looked pretty straight to me now.

'And somewhere round here is where Sir Walter Ralegh had his head chopped off – you know which one he was, don't you? He put his cloak down in a puddle in front of Good Queen Bess to stop her getting her feet wet.'

'So why did he have his head chopped off?'

'Oh, it's a long story. The Queen was dead by then.'

My father is not an historian in any real sense, and no scholar either, but he has a powerful sense of the past as a force that operates on the present. Knowing where great events happened is important to him; it underpins the present. He has made me realize that these great events aren't just things in the pages of books; they have a life of their own, and if you can only summon up enough imagination you can sense their continued existence here in the present, in the place where they happened. My father is an archaeologist of the emotions. He can detect the presence of the past in the humdrum circumstances of the here and now. This is one of his biggest gifts to me.

And what has my mother done for me? Lesser things by comparison, I suppose. Yet she has demonstrated an emotional gentleness, a preparedness to sacrifice herself for my happiness, to fade out when not required. Perhaps that is a negative virtue, but it is a powerful and difficult one all the same. And she is quietly very loving. For the rest of my life I will remember that last night, lying with her in the little camp bed, and turning round when she has finished singing me the lullaby, and seeing

her dark eyes watching me. Almost as though she thinks she is seeing me for the last time.

'In the olden days they used to have a fountain just over there, in front of Big Ben, and it used to pump out red wine when there was a coronation.'

And then, because these things are as real to him as his own life, he switches centuries instantly.

'And over there is where Daphne and I stood when the King and Queen came past in their golden coach after they were crowned in 1937.'

Daphne is his younger sister.

'But I thought you liked the Duke of Windsor more than the King.'

'Well, I did, but it's important to go and see these things for yourself. We were standing right there, where the pavement sticks out.'

'And is he a good King?'

'Oh well, I suppose so. It doesn't really matter very much nowadays, you know. He was good during the war. But all that stuff is a bit old-fashioned.'

In the 1930s my father was an anarchist and a fierce republican, and a little of it always lingers.

We aren't here to see the sights, though; we have a different objective altogether. We get another bus, and it takes us past the little street where Clement Attlee, the Prime Minister, still lives, though not for long, and the place where Charles I was executed.

'"King Charles the First walked and talked, two days after his head was cut off."'

'No, did he really, Daddy?'

'No, of course not. You have to look at the words carefully – that's how people can trick you. It means he walked and talked, then they cut his head off two days later.'

'Oh.'

Being of a mistier, less concrete cast of mind than my father, I prefer the first version.

'And a man came to the Parliament and said that if they gave him some money he'd take the statue and melt it down. And he did take it down, but he secretly told all the people who liked the King that he would sell them medals made from the statue, and they all bought them for quite a lot of money. And then when King Charles's son came back to the throne the man went and told him he'd kept Charles I's statue carefully the whole time, and hadn't melted it down at all. And he could put it back there if the King paid him. So he made money off everyone.'

'But weren't all the people who bought the medals very cross?'

'I suppose they were. But they were so glad to have the King back, they didn't really mind.'

'But the man wasn't really very good to say all those things, was he?'

'No, I suppose not.'

There are times when I think my father feels I've missed the point. As someone who has always had to get by in life with the least advantages, he rather sympathizes with the three-way confidence trickster from the seventeenth century.

We pass Nelson's column, and the Eleanor Cross, and head down the Strand; and each has its story, so that I feel I have to grip hold of it all, just as I have to grip hold of the swaying, bucking bus I am riding on, sitting in the front seat on the top deck.

And what lies below us in the streets of London? A black and grey city, with most of its finer architectural details hidden under the grime of centuries of coal-smoke. Shops still gloomy and monochrome and Victorian-looking, though Lyons Corner House, with its friendly cream paint and curly gold lettering, and – just a little farther on – the ABC with orange lettering,

are brighter and more inviting. Cars mostly old-fashioned, even by 1951 standards, and very few of them. A few taxis, but they are still rare, and our bus moves fast down the empty Strand. Not many people around this Sunday morning, though on every other day this is still probably the busiest thoroughfare in London.

Every man in a hat and suit and tie, every woman in a dress. Newspaper posters telling us that a cricketing disaster has overtaken England. Plenty of bomb damage up and down its length, with big painted Xs for shelters still clearly visible on the walls. Patches of *Saxifraga urbium*, urban saxifrage, which my father sentimentally calls 'London Pride', forcing their way upwards from the empty walls and open cellars of destroyed buildings, bricks crumbling in the damp. Old torn posters in the breeze, catching the sunlight, looking like fingers waving at us as we pass. A general air of fatigue, of grime, of making do, of just getting by with an effort. Not much pleasure, not much joy, not an awful lot of money. A city going through the motions, in desperate need of something good to happen.

'Let's walk over Waterloo Bridge.'

We walk across the brand new bridge, with the copper-green river moving lazily beneath us, and the ships in dozens unloading or loading at the docks. St Paul's the tallest building on the northern skyline, and on the other side of the river the reason we have come here: the South Bank, and the Festival of Britain.

I recognize it from the pictures, and my heart leaps inside me with excitement. Every day since it was opened on 3 May I have longed to visit it, always afraid that it might suddenly shut before its scheduled end on 30 September. Most of my friends at the Crispin School have already been here too: one, the cleverest and possibly richest kid – her father runs a wine shop – has been here three times. Now my sense of being an unfashionable out-of-towner begins to fall away in admiration of the scope of it all.

I know all the main features, of course. First of all there is the strange Skylon, an immense, slender, cigar-shaped object, silver-coloured and held erect by a network of ropes as delicate as a spider's web, which has no apparent function except to show how clever we all are, and to give some sort of feeling of progress, of upwardness, of non-functional, artificial beauty.

Then the extraordinary dome, a vast mushroom on girders, and the strangely shaped pavilions around it which contain the different exhibitions, and the Festival Hall and the film theatre tucked away under Hungerford Bridge; and at the far end something else which exerts a particular attraction for me, the Shot Tower. This isn't modern in any way: it is made of brick and is more than a century old, and I have read without understanding that once upon a time they dropped molten lead down the tower into a tank of water, and the action of gravity made the drops perfectly spherical, for use as shot in guns. Now, someone at school tells me, the Shot Tower is used to display a range of modern telescopes.

It is all laid out before us, and we have simply to go in and look at it all.

'I wish Mummy was with us,' I murmur, as we stand on the bridge looking at it gleaming in the sunshine, with the river running beneath us; I could show you the exact spot today.

My father says nothing.

'I don't like the screaming set-outs.'

Reluctantly, he says, 'Well, some people can't seem to help having them.'

'But when she says sorry, can't you stop then?'

'Anyone can say sorry, but you've got to mean it.'

'Doesn't Mummy mean it?'

'I don't know. She wouldn't carry on if she did.'

'I wish she was with us.'

'Johnny, for God's sake stop going on about it. She's not, and she's not going to be, so you might as well shut up.'

Now it is my turn to keep quiet.

'Look, I'm sorry, old chap, I didn't mean to fly off the handle like that.'

We stand quietly side by side for a while, and he puts his arm round my shoulder. I think about telling him that anyone can say sorry, but decide against it. Not because I'm scared of his temper, though sometimes I am, but because I would like to have an enjoyable time here and further unpleasantness would wreck everything. And it is his birthday, after all.

'We get in via the entrance in Belvedere Road, apparently.'

'Yes,' I say, knowing that he's right. He's always right.