**Headfirst into the void**

*It’s easy to write a memoir, isn’t it?*

*Tore it in half and half again. Rolled it into a ball. Chucked it into the big basket on the floor. Words devoid of – anything. No feeling. Emotionless. Like nude branches on last year’s Christmas tree.*

*“Showed promise.” Memories of success.*

*Didn’t happen. Not this time.*

*“Write a hundred lines.” Memories of failure.*

*It’s easy to write a memoir. Isn’t it? I ask myself again. As my memory engages in its sprockets, tableaux flicker like old movies on different screens. Half the scenes missing and blemished by the scratches and flecks of time. Sometimes only happy showgrounds; at other times, ghouls of a ghost train. And then there are truths too hurtful to mention. Read between the lines. Help me escape.*

*Let me ramble on to myself. Escape. Without the fetter of time.*

I stand on the top stair. And throw myself headfirst into the void with all the force I can muster.

I reach the wall, open my arms and fly out over treetops, pastures and meandering rivers into a freedom I can only imagine. A freedom. A loose scattering of thoughts empty from my brain to lie happy and unhappy alike, jettisoned in the landscapes of my imagination.

A happy; “Help me in the kitchen my darling. Help me with the egg and potato pie. Help me with the chocolate cake. Pass me the spoon. Don’t lick the bowl clean. I was need it for later.” No she doesn’t. Her joke. Then the happiness of it, the hugs. To feel loved and safe in the folds of her apron is enough. Or the anticipation of it. Anticipation is enough to brave the world.

Or, later, an unhappy; “Write a hundred lines. Practice the letter R until it’s perfect. Practice the letter R. Practice the letter R.” As useless as my father barking at me, “What’s seven eights? What’s seven eights.” Pause. “Don’t Know? Don’t know, again? Don’t know?” Pause. Then the unhappiness of it, the beating. Or the fear of it. Fear is enough to freeze the mind.

OK. So I haven’t torn it in half.

Not this time.

All memories are not bad ones.

The first flight from the top of the stairs is most of a lifetime from here, sometime after my fourth birthday. The magical flight is not long enough.

It’s never long enough, because I want to reach something forever out of reach. Escape. Freedom. Too young to know what freedom might be, I wake up. In bed, as usual, in Wembury near Plymouth in Devon.

### It isn’t the first house I recall. During the war, we live in a cottage in Lord Clinton’s Devonshire estate: both my maternal grandparents are long-standing members of the below-stairs staff so I guess they have privileges. Or, in the war, they are the only ones left. Dad Dan, as he is to us, is chauffer to the Clintons and in charge of the mechanical side of the estate – everything from radios that he builds to grand cars that he repaires; he teaches me what a torque wrench is. Grandma tells me about the wonder of cooking as I sit obedient at the beechwood table. In a huge Windsor chair.

### After my father came home from his harrowing duties in the Artic convoys, we move to Horrabridge. An unfriendly, double fronted Victorian house, separated from the road by a variegated laurel hedge and with a gravel, rock-edged path winding to the front doorstep. The inside is dark, perhaps foreboding, with what Mum and Dad refer to as ottomans under the two front bay windows. Window seats, but like an ottoman they can be opened to reveal storage space, were they not nailed shut.

### I don’t remember moving there, but the severe winter of 1946-7 is imprinted in my mind as one of my earliest memories. Perhaps not the first, but the clearest. It snows! And snows and snows and snows, much to my delight. My poor sister Vyvyen is ill in bed with chickenpox and I am outside, building what seems to a three-year-old child as a most monstrous snowman. Ably helped by a young woman who lives nearby. I am infatuated by her, to the extent of peeing my pants rather than lose a second of her company. I get chickenpox a week or two later, and am nagged at for scratching. I didn’t see the young woman again but her image remains with me, dressed in her land-girl dungarees and green jersey.

It is the ottomans that dictate the end of that house, perhaps even the source of the sense that something bad was abound. They appear not to have been opened for years, but on doing so what is found leads to raised voices, and a very quick exit. I can’t tell you what was found, for I am never told. I think it was dry rot; but it was the war years and so perhaps something more sinister.

Plymstock is the next move, to a house that I do not recall. We must have been there a short time because I am still four when we move to Wembury and I start school the following autumn term, marching down the road with Vyvyen. And back for lunch, except on Thursdays when Mum goes shopping.

I stand again at the top of stairs in my pyjamas and sail out once more over the treetops watching the panorama slowly moving below me. I am free. Temporally.

I am in the enchanted world of Rupert Bear and his only human but magical friend, Tiger Lily. What captures my attention above all else is Rupert’s flying voyages. To me, flying with the clouds like Rupert, supported by nothing other than my arms, represents ultimate freedom. Aeroplanes are objects of war.

My mother reads me the strips from the Daily Express as I sit on her knee in the dining room, beside the almost ever silent radiogram: not completely silent, for the strains of the ballad over which she closes her eyes, croons softly and holds me close have stayed with me all these years; *The Foggy Foggy Dew*. I have wondered if those telling words meant something to her. Again, untold.

I stop jumping off the top step when I am eight years old and we move to Redhill. The stairs lose the magic I know so well; there is a bend halfway down that would interrupt the wonderful feeling of headlong flight that I enjoy. But that doesn’t stop my dream-flying. Over time, the landscapes become more realistic as I forage for exciting images in my junior school textbooks and supplant them over Rupert’s view. Although there is a vast collection of 78’s at home, I remember no books.

At my paternal grandparents’ house in Godstone that we visit every second Christmas, the treat is Grandpa’s extensive library. He has a wonderful – I would venture to say miraculous – memory: his favourite party trick is to ask my sister and me to choose a work of Shakespeare and to read aloud any two lines. He then carries on, word perfect, as we try to find a fault in his reciting. We never do. He tells us that he has memorised the whole of Shakespeare on his walks to and from his place of work – a feat I find it hard to believe but if true, remarkable. Reading and walking? Well, there was little traffic I suppose.

More exciting for me is his reciting of stories from Puck of Pook’s Hill, mixing fantasy with history and told by ‘the oldest Old Thing in England’ to Dan and Una, two children that I liken to us. It was me ‘trotting through the dark’, and the illustrations by H.R. Millar lend another dimension to my nightly visits to the wander-lands of escape.

As the years roll by, the landscapes I fly over become less magical; realism and the urge to explore emerged. My flights, even though not down-the-stairs, continue into my later childhood and teen years, but the flying experience is more a quest for knowledge of the unknown world that I survey from my imaginary vantage station in the sky.

In these later dreams a shabby house flashes itself, unannounced, on my landscapes.   
I can never see the whole house, just the side of it viewed from a rear corner point and with an annex attached to the back wall, forming a dank and never-sun-lit corner. An overgrowth of weeds encroaches on a mossy brick-laid path. It seems to be planted in a thicket of trees, leaves overhanging. If not sinister, it is a vision that stops me. Paint flakes off the once-white windowless walls and there is a door in the annex, dark green, with a rusty latch that I rattle but never open.

I always find myself awake with my hand on the latch. I don’t feel the need to go in, but what is inside continues to be a question even in my woken mind. Why the house features so strongly, what its significance is or how it fits into my nightly wanderings and in my awake-life remain, then and now, obscure. It is my house. My retreat. My escape-to-be.

One day, asleep, I do enter. There is no dramatic opening of the door; merely a dissolve of the scene from the outside to a new scene of the inside; a spartan, white and empty space devoid of any human presence, with huge plate glass windows overlooking the forests and lakes I fly over. As I move through doorways, the empty, pristine white scene repeats itself. Endlessly the same.

Visiting the inside of the house is the end of my flying dreams. A full stop. I am now a teenager, school is approaching its latter years and other forms of escapism take over my life. Characteristically, leaps in the dark with outcomes unformed and hazards unforeseen and from this point, freedom and escape are part of reality, not dreams.

Perhaps one of the causes of my need to escape is my severe dyslexia. I struggle with the problem, unrecognised, all my early school life and end up going to what in those days is dubbed 'a school for backward children'. My father is not sympathetic – dyslexia was largely unknown and from an early age he barks spelling and math tests at me at any time the idea comes into his head. It keeps me in a constant state of anxiety, hoping for an escape route. There are none.

By some miracle, at about 11 or 12, one of my teachers, a certain Monsieur Boret, teaches me how to make myself understood on paper; he has a disgusting habit of frequently cleaning his right ear with an endless supply of matchsticks that he keeps in his right waistcoat pocket and deposits, used, in the left one. All the teachers are a bit flawed – it is after all a school for misfits, staff included.   
But I like him.

M Boret had previously worked in Canada where there was a greater understanding of the subject of dyslexia than in the UK. For me and I suppose for others, dyslexia doesn’t mean I can’t read or understand; it means that I can’t communicate what I know. What is never addressed is what I suppose to be a similar condition involving faces; when I meet people, even those I know well, it is always the first time I have met them – or so it seems to me. Prosopagnosia is the proper name for that unfortunate condition. It is a little-known condition at the time of my schooldays, but it lends an explanation for the solitude I find welcoming in my escapes.

Alone, I am free.

During my journey from apparent ignoramus to something approaching normality, I come across my sister’s textbooks on physics and chemistry. I am now a rebellious 14 year old youth. Those subjects were considered too arduous for the pupils at my unsung school, but they intrigue me, and a new adventure – a new escape - leaps before my eyes; I will become another Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

I build a bicycle with bits reclaimed from the local dump, more sporting than Dan Dan’s old bike that my mother had donated to me on his death. With my magnificent machine, which I call Flook after the magical animal dreamed up by Wally Fawkes (of Troglodytes fame), I can cycle to evening classes two days a week to study those subjects of such mysteries. It says something of my home life that, until almost the end of the second year of the classes, my parents think I am going to the coffee bar.

My evening class tutor enters me for physics and chemistry O levels, and I pass them both plus all the subjects taught at my school, beating by some margin the previous average of subjects passed – one. Thus, I am accepted for the sixth form at Reigate Grammar to do my chosen subjects for A levels. This also means parting with my friend, Frank Watkins, Temporally, as it happens. He’s the only bloke that my prosopagnosia allows me to recognise because of his surprising shock of pure white hair; he goes on to study at Reigate art school.

For me, art is just another form of escapism; I do not enjoy the twice weekly practice of *The Corps* (marching around the playing fields dressed up as soldiers) so I am allowed to choose a class as an alternative. I choose art and as luck would have it the tutor is Harold Watts, who had recognised the potential in John Bratby, leader of kitchen sink realism in art. Watts shows great interest in my work and takes me, rather as he did Bratby, under his wing. I come first in art in the end of year exams, but Watts awarded the prize to the guy who came second; I guess not to show favouritism. Or something. I am, though, a bit miffed.

In the science subjects the essential thing I lack, leading to my downfall, is *background*. It’s not enough to study the exam syllabus alone. In any subject, you need years of background work to call on. That I don’t have – so, endless hours of study and reading are called for, guided again by my evening class tutor. It is too much. In the middle of the exams I have a complete nervous breakdown; my first.   
I can’t continue. My dreams of becoming another Brunel are shattered. Come to think of it, the breakdown is, perhaps, my first true escape.

I am summoned by the Education Committee at Surrey County Council to explain myself. It must have been early August because I drive there as a brand new 18 year old and about to take my driving test. Mum is fuming at me from the passenger seat because I almost annihilate a motor cyclist when overtaking a bus, just as he is turning right in front of the bloody thing. I think she is more worried about her car than the fate of the motorcyclist.

The committee express a degree of sympathy with my exam predicament and ask if I do anything else. I explain my dabbles in art and one of them suggests I returned the following week to show them some of my stuff. This I do (Mum fuming again). To my surprise, the conversation about my art goes surprisingly well and I leave as an elated young man with the possibility of a new career.

Armed with the thought of yet another new beginning, another escape into an unknown world, I renew my attempts at sketching.

A few days later I am sitting on a bench on Wray Common early in the evening, contemplating my new future and sketching the windmill that had been a Reigate landmark since the early 1800’s. Now in disrepair, standing forlornly in a vast bramble patch, it makes a good water colour subject. The late summer evening light is haunting. The blackberries are excellent too; fortified, no doubt, by a hundred and fifty years of discarded grain husk.

I am not aware of her approaching. She just appears, looking over my shoulder at my sketchbook. “Can I see?” she says, easing my sketchbook from   
my hands.

“These are great, where are you studying?”

She is slim, wearing a brick-red smock dress I think, about my age with long, almost black, wavy hair. If she isn’t wearing a brick-red smock dress, she should be – she seems a smock sort of girl. I don’t really notice her eyes – grey perhaps, but I imagine them to be alluring; wonderful thing, imagination. However, she isn’t watching me. She is thumbing intently through the book, opening pages and then looking back over previous sketches. Valerie, as I learn later.

“I'm not studying anything at the moment.” I said, “I was at the grammar school doing physics, maths and chemistry.”

“You’re not studying art? You should be. Look, have you got time to come over to my house? It’s over there, behind the trees. Scrambled egg for tea sound OK? I can cook eggs.”

She says something like that; the deal is made, and in youthful anticipation I follow her across the road and through the trees. Big Victorian house. No one at home.

I don’t remember any eggs, scrambled or otherwise, and I don’t remember what we did until, a shortish time later, her dad comes in presumably from work. She immediately hands him the sketch book, saying nothing. He looks through it, again silently. Minutes pass. I can only speculate as to what prompts him to ask,

“You’re not the chap exhibiting in the art shop in Redhill?”

I am. The shop proprietor had asked me what on earth I was doing with the large amount of oil paint I was buying – I’d bought paint there for years and the volume had grown over time. I try to describe one of my early works and he suggests I bring it down to show him, which I do, the next day – I’d just passed my driving test much to my mother’s surprise. The painting is a big one called ‘Vice’ that I had painted some years previously.

For years I had dabbled with painting, coming first or second in art at my useless school; second always to the same person, Frank, who later became Head of Graphics at Philips Home Appliances in Eindhoven and a sufferer of Alopecia Universalis when all his amazing hair fell out after a severe attack by a swarm of bees. Young bald men are rare in the 50’s, so I still recognise him.

I don’t remember much of the proprietor at the art shop except that he has the regulation goatee beard and thin pointed face, but he explains that he has a large room in the back – proudly called his gallery – and would be delighted to display one of my paintings in the window, hang some others in the ‘gallery’ and invite a few chums to view the works. I suppose one of those chums was Valerie’s dad.

I had started to paint big works some years earlier, escaping again this time into the folds of neo-surrealism.

For some reason, my parents have gone away for a few days. I am about 14 and I attack my dad’s Sapele-lined study door with a painting, sketches of which I had doodled on the inside lid of my school desk. It is of a headless torso with tree branches in place of arms, flaying above its neck and entangling the Sword of Damocles indicating imminent peril. The torso rises from a purple lake stained with its blood; the reflection in the lake is the Staff of Asclepius, indicating healing. The foreground is a cliff featuring a broken fence – all my paintings at that time feature a broken fence, even my landscapes. My mother comments; openings for escape. Paths to freedom.

This was ‘Vice’, the one I took to the art shop and which I later sell to the Jehovah Witnesses for, they said, their London England Temple which, oddly, was in the sleepy hamlet of Newchapel just 10 miles down the road in Surrey. Must have surprised the congregation.

Dad takes down the painted door, stuffs it in the garage and says not very much. I paint the replacement door with an equally obscure work called ‘Ambition’. A muscular lad draped in a purple loin cloth, climbing a rope to the sky while being attacked by winged nymphets.

I think there must have been words, because after that I use six-by-four foot sheets of marine plywood – how I got them home is lost in time. Other paintings included ‘Solitude’, featuring a blind, naked man dragging chains and about to walk through the broken fence towards the cliff edge. Another features the pointing finger of God creating, not Adam, but an empty sardine can. Can’t remember what I called it – but escapisms, all of them.

“These are quite impressive.” says Valerie’s Dad of my sketches. “I’m Tom Eckersley, Head of Graphic Design at the LCP”.

The LCP was London’s most prestigious printing and graphics college. There, Eckersley *(1914-1997)* had founded in the 1950’s the first undergraduate graphics course in the UK and is credited with transforming British graphic design.

He’s seen my paintings and now my sketchbook, but says no more about them during what I think is a general conversation. I am taken aback (*no, don’t be silly, you were blooming well flabbergasted*) when there and then he offers me a place in his college. Should, that is, “you ever get a grant.” I hadn’t mentioned my conversations with the education committee to Valerie, so it is her turn to be surprised when I tell them that the committee had awarded me a full County Major Scholarship without the need to re-sit any exams. Not to be a bridge designer, but as an artist.

With the scholarship, I can rent a flat in London, pay my living expenses and attend any art college I want, again with a caveat “should you find a college that will accept you”. The committee had wanted me to go to the Slade School of Fine Art but had left me with an open choice. Brilliant! Brilliant and difficult at the same time. I had been mulling over which escape route to take as I sketched the windmill.

Eckersley ended my difficulty by saying, “See you in a few weeks then.”

I suppose I stutter something to the effect that I need a little time, but I don’t remember the end of that conversation. I guess I have every right to be speechless. From failed potential civil engineer to an arts placement in a senior college and an open grant, all in the space of a couple of weeks – incredible. And an entirely new freedom.

I call Frank the next morning. “Unbelievable!” he yells and says something to the effect of, “I’m going to the LCP as well – graphics are the thing. No one ever makes any money as an artist. I’m going to look for a flat in London tomorrow. And I need a flatmate. Want to join me?”

Indeed I do. The last piece of the jigsaw has fallen into place and a new escape has begun. It is a condition of the scholarship that I do well in the first year; I come first but the award was made to a lanky, scruffy and older second-time-around student who comes second. I never found out why. I am considerably more than miffed this time, being over-ridden for a prize for a second time.

But, as a would-be life escapee, maybe I had earned the invisibility I had craved as I launched myself headfirst into the void yet again, 60 years ago.

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