

Little Child Inside the Man

Clunk. The heavy oak door closes behind me with an echo of sepulchral finality. I'm lost in darkness. Acrid, sickly-sweet beeswax furniture polish overwhelms me, invading my nostrils and colonising my fear. My pulse is in my face.

'Well, come on! Hurry up child!' a harsh old Irish voice demands from the other side of the curtained filigreed iron grille, 'I haven't all day!'

I dare not breathe for fear of angering the monster in the shadows further. My unblinking eyes adjust just enough to make out his silhouetted devilish figure behind the blood red cloth. The anonymity it offers is mocked by the creepy terror it evokes.

'Kneel down boy!'

I obey instinctively dropping heavily to my naked knees on the creaking kneeler, stifling a cry. The hard, worn-out leather hassocks offer no comfort. I tremble, ashamed. Sinful. Alone.

'Bless me father for I have sinned,' I whimper between gasps.

'Clearly, or you wouldn't be here!' comes back his sadistic quip, enjoying absolute power within his threateningly intimate lair.

I can't remember my sins, mostly 'invented' for fear of appearing too good, since making my first confession the week before in this same confessional box. A very different experience. Celebratory high church pomp and Latin chorister soaring, that ended with a shiny commemorative medal pinned to my blazer that felt like the first significant achievement of my seven-year-old life. A recognition bestowed upon new grown-ups by old grown-ups. A promise of a way out of the invisibility of childhood.

I was expecting to see Father Howell again, whose name was still displayed misleadingly on the door outside. A gentle, well-spoken younger priest, who had been encouragingly kind when hearing my first confession, as I'd admitted angry feelings about my older brother and shame at borrowing a record from my mother's collection without asking.

'God is merciful and forgives you these sins' he'd said. 'For your penance, say one Hail Mary and one Our Father.'

'Thank you, Father' I'd replied through the grille, rising quickly to my feet barely able to contain the first vertiginous lightness of absolution.

I'd opened the door to face the trepidatious gazes of other young scallywag-cherubs, too small for their pew in the vast vaulted chapel. They were dressed untypically in blazers, shorts and white dresses, bought with family savings or made or borrowed specifically for the occasion. They had studied my expression for clues about the trial ahead. My haloed smile had given them encouragement.

Now a week later all has changed. The reassuring Father Howell has been replaced beyond the curtain by a sinister presence, whose stench of stale alcohol and cigarettes sucks the oxygen out of the tiny space, transforming it into an ungodly torture chamber.

My throat won't moisten. My voice arrives higher than I intend as I attempt to soothe the beast.

'It is one week since my last confession'

'Den why's it taking you so lang to remember y'sins!?' comes the cruel rebuke in hard Irish brogue. A gruff, icy, barren impatience that requires no forgiveness, so worn-down is it by the cost of celibate devotion that it has no love left for anyone, especially inner-city no-hopers like me.

I am reminded of this ‘out of my depth’ experience years later, as I find myself alone and once more uncomfortably exposed by a sense of life-changing significance and challenged confidence.

It is July 1985, and I am twenty-three. I am sitting, at the occupant’s insistence, with shoeless feet in the ‘White Room’ on the seventh floor of the spooky, renaissance revivalist Dakota Building in New York City.

Everything about this room is expensively luxurious yet understated. Classically minimal. Straight lines. White and silver. Effortless. A woman’s touch. The refinement of more than wealth: breeding. Somewhere to breathe, becalmed within the eye of a notoriously raging city. A home befitting the daughter of a banker father and classical pianist mother who was educated at Tokyo’s exclusive Gakushūin University before gaining international renown as a conceptual artist.

I stare at items unsettlingly too familiar to someone on a first visit. I feel the voyeur’s indecency as I recognise the white baby grand piano just feet away, as the same instrument on which John and Yoko recorded *Imagine* in Ascot in 1971. There are original drafts of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning and Robert Browning poems annotated in the poets’ own hands in frames on the wall above. I realise that until four and a half years ago, this room was the epicentre of the life of arguably the most famous couple on the planet.

An increasing sense of trespass forces me to turn away and focus on the fidgeting hands in my lap. People’s homes house personal items. Their associative memories to be shared only with their nearest and dearest. My proximity feels almost sinful. A stranger once more in a powerful person’s lair. Gazing at history. Struggling to own it. Assigning it to memory like a burglar receiving the scene before a theft.

I run my hand through my hair in a childish effort to look more presentable for my hallowed hostess as I await her return. Yoko is organising tea in preparation of our ‘chat’ about her life with John.

‘So what would you like to know?’ she says, gliding barefoot into the room and climbing onto an identical white sofa opposite large enough to sleep a family of six, before curling her feet under her.

She senses my discomfort.

‘How does it feel?’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Being in the bubble?’ she smiles mischievously.

‘Oh that. Yeah. Weird.’

I know what she means. This is an entirely different level of renown to anything I’ve experienced before. Meeting her in Central Park the day before, during a break in filming for the NBC production *John & Yoko: A Love Story*, I was aware of her small army of security staff creating the private ‘safe’ space around us, as we walked and talked within the most visited urban park in the United States. A major operation for what should have been a simple afternoon jaunt across the street. I had the impression she considered every moment of everyday for potential risk. Not out of paranoia, as one might expect of the widow of an assassinated twentieth century icon, but rather as befitting a full-time inhabitant of that ‘bubble’ to which she now referred, that represented the segregated existence of the far too famous. Those who even if they wanted to, could no longer return to the relative peace of obscurity anywhere on the planet.

Sitting in her home now, I understood the importance of this vast labyrinthine apartment. Its many rooms, nooks and crannies providing escape from the clamour and roar of public ownership.

‘So what d’you want to know?’ she says again, removing the large designer sunglasses she uses like a geisha fan to play an almost coquettish game of hide-and-seek, as she catches your eye when addressing you before disappearing from view again as you reply. Her face looks shy without her prop, but any sense of vulnerability is dispelled by the fiery intelligence in her eyes.

The laser precision of her question has me stumped.

‘You must have something to ask?’

I did. But like my rehearsed sins to ensure a smooth second confession all those years ago, the questions I had prepared the evening before after Yoko had called to invite me over, are now lost in the heat of the moment.

She giggled, sensing my predicament and making me feel that the joke was definitely on me. I decided to meet fire with fire.

‘What was your first night together like?’ I said looking directly into her eyes with a bluntness John might have appreciated.

In November 1966, John had stayed up all night recording with Yoko at his home in Kenwood, Surrey. John’s wife Cynthia was away with their son Julian and John took the opportunity to invite Yoko over. They had been introduced by a mutual friend who owned the Gallery in London where Yoko was exhibiting her show. It was the night as documented in various accounts, when their mutual devotion was declared and they became to quote John, ‘one word’.

‘Well, you know,’ she said coyly, ‘I won’t go into the finer details, but in the morning, I made breakfast and John went out to buy the Sunday newspapers. I brought in the food and saw he’d spread the papers out on the table. I reached for the *Times* and he smacked my hand. I laughed, you know, he was always joking around. But he was serious. He said, “I read them first.” Well, you know, that was the first thing I sorted out.’

I laughed, releasing a breath I’d probably held since making my second confession. Having researched in depth the life and character of John Lennon for the previous four and a half years, I had never seen or heard anything so simply revealing about his insecurity and complexity.

‘He was like, you know, very macho Liverpudlian. Insecure.’

He wasn’t the only one I thought.