

(Extracts from my Memoir)

‘You dirty bitch, you’re pregnant again!’

My grandmother hit my mother over the head with the empty stout bottle and then continued on her way to the off-licence on the corner to redeem her half-penny.

That night my grandmother was all but extinguished when houses in our street were demolished in a German air raid. But I don’t think it was either of these two traumatic incidents that caused me to be born five months later with the rare and insidious brain tumour that over the next half century grew and grew in my head like a pearl in an oyster and created both the monster and the god.

ONE

‘What’s that?’ the neurosurgeon Mr B asked me in the intimidating tone of a schoolmaster trying to elicit an answer from a nervous and ill-prepared pupil.

He stabbed his forefinger on the monitor screen which showed an MRI scan of my skull. I could make out a dark, sinister-looking patch about the size of a golf ball at the centre of my brain. I gazed at it in silence for a few moments while he waited.

‘No idea,’ I finally said, I give up, *you* tell me.’

‘I’ve no idea either,’ he said, ‘I’ve never seen anything like it before!’

He seemed as thrilled and awed as an astronomer discovering a brand new star in the inner space of my head which he couldn’t wait to claim and name.

‘All I know for sure is that it appears to be a very large tumour growing right deep down inside your head, just below your brain and it’s now almost touching your brain stem!’

‘Oh, is that serious?’

‘Well, if it’s allowed to grow any more you’ll be dead!’

To my astonishment I felt infected by the man’s sheer joy at finding something so apparently dangerous and rare. B didn’t elaborate further but

suddenly began ordering me to walk about the room while he sat back in his chair and observed. He instructed me to perform steps-and-turns as though I were a circus horse he was putting through its paces. The joy that he'd rubbed off on me quickly began to dissipate for I was beginning to feel a little irritated by his peremptory voice and cold, weirdly detached yet over-exhilarated manner. I was about to ask him why he wanted me to perform for him like a flea under a microscope when he fell silent, eyed me with a satisfied, more kindly expression in his eyes and told me to sit down. He gazed at me in a thoughtful silence and wonder for some moments and then said 'I need to operate on you, to do a stealth-guided transphenoidal biopsy so that I can find out for sure what that thing in your head is. It's urgent if I'm to save your life – you need to come in to hospital right away – tomorrow – and I'll do the biopsy the day after. I have to warn you though that the biopsy itself will be a major procedure – unfortunately you could die on the operating table.'

'Die? Hmm, that *would* be inconvenient. You see I've just published my Sudan novel 'Red over Blue' which has taken me thirty years to write and have plans to tour the UK doing readings at Waterstones and other venues to promote it. So, what if we just leave the surgery for the time being so I can at least finish my tour?'

'If I do nothing now you'll probably become completely paralysed quite soon, in a matter of weeks from now – once that tumour hits your brain stem – and you'll become very ill and die. No, hopefully we've caught it only just in time.'

Returning from Haywards Heath Brain Surgical Unit I sat with my girlfriend Jean on the bus in a stunned silence while she held my hand. Naturally I felt all the usual feelings which other cancer patients have written about so eloquently in their usually brave, upbeat and oddly characterless, tedious memoirs along the lines of 'How I Stayed Positive and Conquered Cancer', 'No Time to Lose' or 'Every Second Counts,' in which they describe the wonderful skills and humanity of the surgeons who saved their lives (and in the case of celebrities bonded so closely that they became drinking buddies), to say nothing of the marvellous support of their families and friends, but right now apart from a sadness for Jean whose husband had also been diagnosed with brain cancer at the same age as I was (66) and had died within a month, I felt a curious sense

of euphoria, a sense that something challenging and real was about to happen to me; something in the magnitude of the bladder cancer and bleeding ulcers I'd battled with for years alone in my seedy Cambridge bedsit during the 1980s whilst writing draft after draft of *Red over Blue*, which I'd spent two years researching in Sudan. So, this was not the first time in my life I'd felt close to dying, even though, at the moment, apart from the diplopia, occasional mild headaches, and sudden extended bouts of narcoleptic sleepiness, I felt pretty fit and well: the idea that I might be dead before Christmas was purely notional as a result of viewing the MRI scan of my brain and the conversation with Mr B. In a way, I actually felt quite relieved that once again, the most feared disease on earth – indeed, the most feared word there is in any language (even more so than AIDS) now applied to me – big time. But I guess we all feel we are living with the imminent arrival of bad news, and if this wasn't yet the bad news, it'd do until the real thing got here. However, once again I became concerned with not so much the fear of dying, but of dying before I'd had time to 'put my house in order'. I hated the idea of leaving projects unfinished and the physical chaos of my tiny run-down seaside flat behind me, in which, for the last six years since, encouraged by Jean, I'd seriously taken up painting again after a hiatus of nearly a quarter of a century due to the demands of novel writing, attending college, travel, teaching abroad, illness, lack of space and lack of money to buy paints, and that now served both as my studio and my home, and was already packed with my completed canvases – mainly portraits and nudes. Since I didn't have an agent, and no support moral or otherwise from anyone but Jean, and certainly no reputation or kudos apart from winning the little-known David Rose painting prize in the Sussex County Arts Club Brighton Festival Exhibition three years earlier, for my controversial portrait of a semi-nude, well-stacked young woman entitled "That Blue Dress", it seemed likely that my paintings, as well as the copyright to my self-published and unpublished books would become extinct with me, and "Red over Blue", which I'd risked my life to research and write over the last twenty-eight years would be buried with me, unread, unknown, apart from a handful of friends who'd read it and thought it one of the greatest novels they'd ever read. Thus my immediate concern was not to save my own life, but to as it were save my previous *life*, that is, my legacy, however modest that might be. But in my heart, did I feel that something extraordinary had to be experienced and accomplished to enable me to accept not only the grim fate that seemed likely to lie in store for me, but to approve the life I had so long lived? If this was the

case, the fear of death might be described as the fear of failing to become whom one had planned to be, if the certainty befalls us that it will never be achieved. You suddenly don't quite know how to live the time – however short - that can no longer be part of a whole life.

It occurred to me to me that although there was no time for me to arrange an exhibition of my paintings before my life-risking surgery, there might be people 'out there' who although they would never normally be able to afford to buy serious art works like mine, might be happy to save them from the town tip if I simply gave them all away to anyone who appreciated them and had room for them. Jean, of course, would have loved to have them, but there was no room in her tiny one-bedroomed flat in Hove, and I had no other friends in Brighton & Hove, nor anywhere in the world for that matter. When I telephoned Brighton Art Museum to explain my situation and to offer them my entire body of work as a gift to the people of Brighton, the curator sounded very sniffy, unenthusiastic and suspicious:

"Are they modern paintings?" he asked.

"Yes, I have a big range of expression – they're intense, often visceral, figurative works."

"Then we can't have them here – we don't want to display any of that modern stuff here."

"Oh, yes, sorry, I keep forgetting this is Brighton." He didn't even want to check out my website, let alone actually see what I was offering him.

Neither Jean nor I had any connections in the art world, so having no form of agent, I had no idea how I might have sold my paintings, especially as I'd landed up living in Brighton, a small-minded town, emphatically inimical to serious art or anything other than the frivolous and generic, where the people celebrated the mediocre, and cold-shouldered the challenging, the authentic, the excellent, in other words, anything that invited them to feel or think. Apart from a few on-and-off years in the 1970s when living in self-imposed poverty in-and-around Chichester after which I'd stopped for twenty-five years due to lack of money and lack of space in the numerous bedsits I'd occupied, and because I'd gone to live in Africa, and also my pre-existing commitment to writing, I'd only been painting at the time of my brain cancer diagnosis for six

years, since turning sixty, and even then I'd had to take a year off to complete 'Red over Blue' and other books. In those five years I'd accumulated a small body of work of about forty paintings, and a hundred or more pencil drawings, but I hadn't tried to sell anything since 1973 when my ex-friend the illustrator and art dealer Richard had helped me obtain a pitch in London along the railings at Green Park opposite Half Moon Street and Shepherds' Market. In those days I had a tiny bedsit on Bracklesham Bay seafront eight miles from Chichester and, having saved up enough money to live on frugally for a few months after a month's leave for stomach ulcers I quit my job as a postman in East Wittering and taught myself to draw and paint.

I recall I'd become enchanted with a fifteen year old Jewish girl, who in this memoir I shall call Madeleine, with an hour glass figure, and the stunning looks of a young Ingrid Bergman, who lived in a great big house on West Strand, West Wittering, which are private roads and were and still are, I've learnt since those long ago days, among the most expensive and exclusive addresses on the south coast of England. I'd met Madeleine on my post round, and my feelings for her could only find expression in the form of a poem or a painting. I felt driven to paint her from imagination and memory, since I didn't even possess a photo of her. Ours was a strange relationship. Every week day afternoon after I'd made my second delivery to the rich industrialists and stars of stage and screen (e.g Donald Pleasance and Ferdy Mayne) who occupied the mansions along East and West Strands, I'd wait with my bike by the small red post box at the top of Berry Barn Lane between East Strand and West Strand, until five o'clock when it was time for me to open the box and empty it of all the letters and post cards. While I waited until it was time to make my collection, if I looked across the meadow of poppies and sunflowers towards the main road from Chichester I'd see the green and cream Southdown bus carrying Madeleine and her fellow school mates chug its way to the end of Berry Barn Lane where it stopped to let Madeleine alight. Then I'd watch her walking up the winding lane towards where I waited on my red bike beside the red collection box, her brown hair often blowing across her face in the breeze, making her sweep it away again with her hand. Madeleine looked like a dream, a vision, almost too beautiful to be real in her short red uniform, her school satchel slung over her shoulder, like all young girls never wearing a winter coat, however bitterly the wind blew off the English Channel. When she reached the

top of the lane where I waited by the post box, instead of turning right to go to her house on West Strand, she'd just walk right up to me without smiling and simply wait with me in solemn silence for ten to fifteen minutes until it was time for me to make my collection. Occasionally she'd whisper hello but most days she wouldn't say a word. She'd just wait. I didn't speak either. I was touched, entranced. It was like I were sharing, in that most romantic and idyllic of settings, something mystical, a sacred moment of meditation or prayer. Certainly it was a transcending, spiritual fifteen minutes, a wonderful, unique form of communication it seemed to me on the highest most transcending level. It seemed that in these precious moments of silent worship grace was bestowed on us as though we'd knelt at the altar together to receive the Eucharist, something holy that bespoke love and passion for the moment restrained. We didn't physically touch each other. Eventually I'd open the box, take the letters and we'd both go our separate ways, silently, without even a goodbye. On one occasion though her bus was late and I'd already made the collection and cycled down to the bottom of the lane just as she was entering it. Uncharacteristically as soon as she saw me she gave me a radiant smile and said 'hi!' as I sped past her and hit the main road. On another occasion, she was walking up the lane as I was going down it and the girl (here I've called Jane) she was with this time I'd earlier befriended because she read the same paper as me Peace News which I delivered to her house on West Strand, a few doors away from Madeleine's called out 'Hi Brian, can I ask you some questions?' I stopped and while Madeleine stood silently by, Jane asked me if I knew the nationality of Roman Polanski, and whether I had read Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet. Knowing the films of the Polish film director and having recently read the Quartet I was able to talk with the girls for quite some while about them, especially the Quartet with its dazzling use of language and imagery but limited characters who seemed to me more like ciphers than authentic people. I can't imagine a fifteen year old girl asking her young postman such questions today, not only because she'd have no interest in such arcane subjects but she'd probably be too preoccupied as she sauntered up the lane scrolling through her smart phone checking her likes to her latest selfie on her Facebook to even notice someone as insignificant as her postman.

My first drawing ever was of Madeleine, her blouse unbuttoned baring what I deduced from having stood close to her by the post box on the Strand were her throat, her clavicles, her magnificent breasts. I made the drawing soon after I quit my post round after being ill with my reoccurring disease of stomach ulcers. I guess my feelings for Madeleine were informed by my illness, my pain, my isolation, the novels and poems I was reading at that time including Anna Karenina, the Great Gatsby, Wuthering Heights, Rilke, Eugenio Montale, Samuel Becket, as well as the letters to his brother Theo from Vincent Van Gogh, the music of Chopin and Mahler, and the reproductions of paintings I was constantly looking at in the artists' monographs I'd purchased with my hard-earned money and saved from my post round. It was at this time I started writing a journal or diary, which I've kept up ever since and now have about fifty A4 hard-backed bound volumes-plus the entries I made in a dozen blue exercise books with the school crest of a bee eater on both the front and back covers during the two years I was teaching at Hantoub School, Wad Medani, Sudan eight years later whilst researching 'Red over Blue'. My very first entry was about my feelings for Madeleine, expressed in a very adolescent and innocent way for a man of thirty years, full of passionate yearning and melancholy, the determination to transcend the life I'd led until then in London, that I believed had brutalised my mind, become a better person, worthy of Madeleine, which, looking back on forty-nine years later whilst I am struggling to write this memoir, exhausted by brain cancer, my fourteen year old battle with consultants and GPs and at my terminus, refer me to back to Proust's *'Le Recherche du Temps Perdu'* which I read a few years later and the paintings and private journals of Edvaard Munch neither of which I'd yet read at this time. When Jane visited me subsequently at Bay House, Bracklesham Bay, she immediately noticed my pencil portrait of Madeleine where it hung beautifully framed under glass on the buttercup-yellow wall in my tiny seaside bedsit, and, with a cry of wonder and delight recognised it immediately as Madeleine, and told me how beautiful it was, and that, if I liked, she could smuggle it to Madeleine, whom she was sure would be touched and thrilled that she'd so inspired me . So I signed it and wrote self-consciously on the back 'from the boy from the other side of the tracks', wrapped and taped it carefully and gave it to Jane. I didn't hear anything at all from the two girls after that, but, more than a year later I was talking to a college student working during his

holidays in the book warehouse, Gibbings and Harrison in Chichester where I had a new dead-end job loading and unloading lorries and he suddenly said 'It's you! You're that postman aren't you! When I was going out with Madeleine she never stopped talking about you! She was very drawn to you, she was fascinated by you! She loved that drawing you did of her, but she'd never let *me* see it. Her parents never knew it existed either – a girl friend of hers told me she kept it wrapped up in one of her shirts in a drawer, and would only take it out every now and then to gaze at it when she was alone. No, she never showed it to me, but her friend told me about it. I was pissed off with you at the time but now that I've met you I can see what she saw in you,' he said magnanimously. 'Seriously Brian, I reckon you must be very talented to affect a young girl like that with your art and I hope you have great success with it and are able to leave this warehouse and have the life you deserve.' As I write about my memories and feelings from nearly fifty years ago for Madeleine in this memoir, I realise that if she is still alive somewhere as I hope she is, she is sixty-three years old now, more than twice the age of the young man I was then, when she'd stand with me in silence by the little post box until I'd opened it. I wonder if the post box is still there? Next year (2022) will be the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our silent trysts at the post box on the strands. If I am able, I want to return there, just to stand once more in that place where, half a century earlier we'd both stood together. Subsequently, if I am still alive and have the strength then at the age of eighty, I'll paint a large triptych in memory of those special meetings. I'll call the work 'The Post Box on the Strands'.

I'd worked hard in the months following my portrait of Madeleine, in a strange irrational way as though I owed it to her to become a great artist, as though, safe with her family in her mighty mansion on West Strand, she actually knew what I was trying to do and cared...I musn't let her down I thought since she'd inspired me to do that drawing of her; on the other hand, maybe it was because instinctively knowing Madeleine was beyond my humble reach, I must use the storm of emotions in me to create works of art to compensate me for her absence, works which would speak to me and say 'instead of having Madeleine you've got me.' So, now I was eeking out the bit of money I'd saved from my post round, often staying up all night working, by now painting not in oils but acrylic due to the fast drying times.

By the end of the summer of 1973 I felt confident I'd accumulated enough canvases to start selling my work and so I took up my pitch along the railings outside Green Park, Mayfair. I got them framed by a local man and I'd go up on the train from Chichester to London and leave my unsold paintings with Richard at Ealing Common and collect them again on my next trip up the following weekend, Sales were few and far between. November brought not only freezing rain but an international economic crisis due to a shortage of oil in the Middle East which resulted in dramatic inflation so nobody had any money to waste on non-essentials like art. Weeks and weeks went by and I sold nothing. Richard was still psychologically supportive of me and still managed to make a fair living himself from his own pitch on Bayswater Road which he'd established over nearly ten years, so he'd gained a number of loyal and regular collectors of his paintings, and still made frequent sales despite the harsh financial climate. Although my own existence was getting increasingly precarious and hunger pangs often exacerbated the severe burning in my stomach from the tenacious ulcers which over a decade later whilst I was in Cambridge struggling to write 'Red over Blue' would start bleeding badly necessitating me being rushed to hospital in an ambulance on two occasions for life-saving blood transfusions and bed rest, I was loathe to ease off from my painting and once again take a job which whilst obviously being the sensible thing to do since it would enable me to pay my rent and eat better and give me a much needed break from my weekly bus and train journeys from the coast carrying my heavy burden of paintings, standing all day on my pitch at Green Park in miserable weather, I just couldn't face the idea of so soon quitting my own 'unique life as an artist' and once again immerse myself in the worlds I'd previously known of (mainly) factories, building sites, and offices where, although grateful at times for some company, I could never be anything other than a weird curiosity for I never met anyone like myself with dreams and aspirations, however hopelessly wayward and unrealistic mine undoubtedly were.

One damp November afternoon I was standing on my pitch gnawing at a bread roll I'd stuffed with Cheddar and black olives when Liberace, the famous international showman and pianist came by. He was advancing slowly along the street from the direction of the underground station, pausing for a few moments every here and there to gaze at the artworks on show. It wasn't only

paintings lined up against the railings outside Green Park. On some pitches they had wood and chalk sculpted figures including garden gnomes, ethnic shirts, tie 'n' dye sweat shirts, shoes, toys, scented candles, but mostly it was paintings, all of them bad, including my own, which, although it's not saying much, were probably not quite as bad as most of the others. It wasn't that the other artists work was raw, too primitive or crude – on the contrary, they were over-refined, fussy in an amateurish way, and gave no sense of either 'realism' or 'otherness' even though angels, dragons, devils and pop stars were an ubiquitous theme.

I watched as Liberace, at that time still one of the most famous men on the planet, accompanied by a large friend or minder sauntered nearer my pitch, passed by a stall full of china dolls and then he came and stopped in front of my paintings. I moved discretely to one side while he stood gazing solemnly in front of an abstract landscape of St Paul's Cathedral executed in thick and thin layers of acrylic bounded by varying shapes and thicknesses of black lines imitating ancient Japanese prints or Ukiyoe – 'this fleeting, floating world'.

I was struck by his appearance, even though it was nowhere near as flamboyant as he appeared in his shows. At that time I'd stood close to very few celebrities, and the most interesting thing I'd noticed up to then was the perfect smooth beauty of their skins, Liberace's was no exception. It was flawless and reminded me of my chance encounter with the rock singer Billy Fury in a shoe shop in 1961 in Soho. Such people, even going about their everyday lives seemed to do so in a detached, transfigured state like I'd met them only moments before they became angels and ascended up to Heaven, not because they had recently died, but, on the contrary, they'd attained some sort of physical grace that made it simply inappropriate for them to continue living down here with the rest of us, with our 'paint' flaking off flowing along the gutters like lines of mucus. Of course they were stars, and belonged 'somewhere up there.'

Liberace had his hair combed up in a huge quiff resembling a black frozen wave like Elvis Presley's, a beautiful fitted red lamb's leather bomber jacket like Elvis wore on his 1969 comeback and boots to match. He continue to stand there gazing solemnly at St Paul's. Without once interrupting his gaze to glance at me

he murmured not to me but to his companion 'I'm gonna perform under that dome one day.'

Suddenly he glanced at me:

'How much?'

'Fifty pounds,' I said shamelessly, which in those long ago days was far too much for the work of a completely unknown, impoverished street artist whose work had never once seen the inside of a gallery. (It was to be almost exactly forty years after this to the day that I held my first solo exhibition in Cork Street about ten minutes walk from here behind the Royal Academy through Burlington Arcade...I don't know if I'd known then when Liberace stood on my pitch outside Green Park how hard and how long the struggle I had ahead: would I have given up? I really don't know, but I wish I had, and it gives me no pleasure or consolation at all to know that my parents were absolutely right – that unless I became a priest or a clerk my life would be doomed to failure).

'Hmm I guess that's about \$75. I'll give you \$60 – say £40.'

The suddenly he chuckled. 'If you think that's mean of a millionaire like me to be haggling over prices, let me tell you young man I would never have remained a millionaire if I'd always coughed up whatever price I was asked to pay, and if you ever travel, you'll find that for most merchants they enjoy bargaining with their customers. It helps them get to know people and pass the time of day.'

'Oh? In that case, give me £45 and it's a deal.'

Liberace shook his head and walked away, leaving me standing there in a state of shock. How could I have been so stubborn and so stupid to turn down Liberace for the sake of a few quid, especially as I'd already mentally doubled the price as soon as I recognised him approaching?! Suddenly he turned back, took out his wallet, counted out £42.50 and handed it over.

'I can't carry it with me right now – I have some more things to see. I'll call back and pick it up in a coupla hours or so on the way back to my hotel.'

'Thank you Mr Liberace.'

'That's O.K., kid, you look like you could do with a break. See you later.'

But Liberace never did return to claim the painting he'd paid for, neither that day, nor any other of the subsequent Sundays I was on my pitch at Green Park.

I wasn't happy about this. It seemed Liberace hadn't exactly fallen in love with my painting at all. He'd simply been amusing himself. I felt patronised. Fact is, failing all else, I'd much rather the reverse had happened – if only I'd been magnanimous enough to present St Paul's to the pianist as a gift right away. All the same, Liberace's money for the painting came in the nick of time. It provided me with enough funds to enable me to pay my the rent on my seaside bedsit, eat frugally for the next few weeks, buy materials and purchase train tickets for my weekly journeys up to Green Park from Chichester. Moreover, since I had clearly signed the painting still in my possession, from now on I hung it on the railings outside Green Park with a notice in big letters in black marker pen:

'ON LOAN FROM THE GREAT LIBERACE'.

After another month of zero sales I reckoned it was time to throw in the towel and get a job, any job. Also I detected a cooling of my friendship with Richard. I wondered whether he felt he needed to distance himself from me now that the atmosphere of failure about me was too strong and my passionate, albeit hopeless determination to somehow create original images made him feel guilty, for he, being the master draftsman that he was effortlessly churned out exact copies of models from Penthouse and Playboy and, having carefully copied their lines on the smooth sides of sheets of hardboard he'd battened up with strips of one-by-one, like painting by numbers coloured them evenly in with thin washes of acrylic which left no sign of the brushmarks. The finished work, resembling prints, all completed in a single sitting, were then provided with thin metal frames and sold to his eager customers at Bayswater Road. Moreover, it was quite usual for him to repeat his success over and over by replacing a painting he'd sold only the week before of a naked girl with hair flowing like a waterfall riding a white stallion through a field with another which was the exact same Lady Godiva image. I guess since Andy Warhol some things will never change – people want a work of art that far from being unique, is exactly like what everybody else has up on their walls at home; I remember the green Eurasian girl from the 1960s and the little boy with a single tear rolling down his cheek – in those days everybody went out to the

poster shops and bought one. So, perhaps Richard didn't mind at all that he was doomed to repeat his own success, even though two decades later, long after he'd lost interest in painting and was selling antiques in a shop he rented on Turnham Green, I came across a painting of a girl on a horse standing out in a puddle of rain outside a flea market in the Lanes in Brighton. Recognising it immediately as one of Richard's, I enquired the price and the owner said it was the work of 'a promising, up-and-coming young artist' and he'd let me have it for £50.

I'd finally decided that the last Sunday in November would be my final appearance at Green Park. The previous week I didn't even have enough money for my train fare back to Chichester, and too proud by now to admit defeat to Richard, I'd neither asked him to loan me the £1.45p I needed nor if I could crash on his floor in the big flat I'd shared with him and other freaks a few years earlier on Ealing Common while I was a student actor at Questors Theatre and subsequently writing, rehearsing, and producing my own play 'Journey Into Autumn' for the Oval House Theatre, London.

Having left my paintings with the man on the pitch next to mine to take home with him in his van for safekeeping till the following week, I'd set out around 5.00 pm from Green Park and, wearing a pair of soft red leather DMs I'd bulled up with Dubbin, and a black Royal Mail overcoat, I headed for Chichester and Bay House, the house by the sea in Bracklesham Bay some seventy miles away where I rented my tiny bedsit. All I had to do was follow the road signs going south to the coast. The sun was setting as I marched on through Slough. By the time I reached Guildford I was cold, tired, and very hungry. Desperate for a warm drink I stopped at a payphone and called Mick Leith who a year previously, having seen me in a photographic models' directory had contacted the agency and hired me to model for a series of black and white photographs with a girl called Wendy in the garden of his mansion which was now only a few yards away from the call box in which I was standing. But by now it was ten o'clock at night and Mick was about to turn in. A few miles further on an Aston Martin slowed down as it drew level with me walking along with my thumb stuck out through open country with dark woods on either side. I guess with my long dark curly hair from the rear I could have passed for quite a tasty-looking dolly bird, but as soon as the driver when he drew level also saw I

sported a great big brown beard he put his foot down and roared away into the night. I continued thumbing but cars were few and far between at that hour and none of them stopped.

I arrived in Midhurst at 2.00 am. As I made my way through the silent town it seemed it'd be the most natural thing in the world that I should knock on someone's door and ask for a cup of tea and a crust of bread. I was frozen to the bone, my legs were numb and turned to jelly, and I had to use all my willpower to continue to put one foot in front of the other. I felt as though I were an explorer, coming across an oasis in the desert after weeks of wandering. Suddenly a police patrol car rolled around a corner and drew up alongside me. It was the first time in my life I'd been delighted to be stopped by the police. Two young coppers got out of the car.

'Hallo mate,' said one, 'where're you headed for?'

'Chichester, and then Bracklesham Bay.'

I told them I'd just walked from Green Park.

'Green Park? Where's that,' said the other, 'I thought all parks were green.'

'Green Park, London. I've a pitch along the railings there where I've been trying to sell my paintings.'

'Oh, bit of an artist are you? Got any drugs?'

'I wish!' I said, I don't suppose you've got anything you can spare? – right now a toke on a joint or spliff would be nice.'

'Cheeky sod! But I guess we can't arrest you just for *wishing* you had some dope.'

'But all the same officer, shouldn't you just take me down to the station and shake me down just in case?'

'Nah, you're alright, on your way, hope you make it home alright.' They started to get back in their car.

'Where're you guys going?'

'Back to the station for a nice hot cuppa.'

'C-can't you t-take me w-with you?' I said, my teeth chattering.

'Nah, sorry mate, like I said, we haven't arrested you – so long.'

'Wait a moment. What would I have to do then for you to arrest me?'

Smiling, the taller of the two got out of the car came right up close and whispered in my ear so that his mate couldn't hear:

'Call me a cunt. Go on,' he urged. Still smiling he stepped back quickly to the car.

'You're a cunt!' I said loudly and distinctly. The shorter of the policeman turned (BUT HE'S IN THE CAR) to stare at me, his eyebrow raised quizzically.

The taller policeman kept smiling:

'You're only saying that in the hope that we'll arrest you, invite you to join us down the station in a nice hot cuppa and let you spend the night in one of our nice warm comfy cells. I know you don't mean it, so it's not gonna happen.'

Still smiling, he got back in the car to joint his mate at the wheel.

'You really *are* a cunt! I shouted. And I don't believe you guys are proper cops at all. I think you had a strip-o-gram gig at a hen party and you can't arrest me 'cos you ain't got no cop shop to take me too!'

They suddenly drove off, turning to wave and grin at me.

'C-come b-back here! I haven't finished with you yet. I wanna k-kick the shit out of you you cunt and your c-cunt car!'

The police car turned the corner and sped away.

I felt abandoned, but I suppose even cops get bored on a long night shift rolling around a small town in the middle-of-nowhere bored out of their skulls with nothing to do. Ten years later when I was travelling all over Sudan, which in those days long before the south seceded was Africa's largest and least known country, if I got off a train or lorry in the desert in the middle-of-nowhere, if I made it to the nearest police station, the crew there would always welcome me, the lonely traveller, with a glass of hot tea, a bowl of *ful* beans with bread and a bed for the night all free of charge.

I arrived at Bay House, Bracklesham Bay sixteen hours after setting out from Green Park. The sea was rough and high with big white horses. The pale sun dazzled my bleary eyes as I picked my way among the piles of shingle the sea had thrown up from the beach right across the road during the night. My feet were killing me.

During the following week I lay for long hours on my little bed at the back of Bay House listening to the roar of the pebbles on the beach, watching the waves spiral up and crash against my window. The sea was a demon and I realised now why the owner of the house, my landlord Simon Gail, spent every hour of every week end working on the roof making sure it was secure as several houses in the street had been demolished in the winter storms by the wind and rain.

I lay there leafing through the monographs of great artists I'd bought for a pound each in Chichester: Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh. I was particularly impressed with what I was reading about Gauguin's life, what it took for him to become someone who could achieve such masterworks as 'the Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch', 'Yellow Christ', and 'Where Do We come From?, What Are We?, Where Are We Going?'. I felt a shiver of fear run down my spine as I asked myself the question, 'Have you got what it takes to become a great painter? Have you got the balls?' It never occurred to me that courage, sacrifice, stamina, and hard work may not be enough. I didn't care whether or not I had the talent. I was young and willing to try anything, whatever the price, whatever it took. For me it was all about the journey ahead, and whether I could go on coping with hardship, poverty, bouts of severe illness from debilitating stomach ulcers, loneliness, and whatever else was in store for me. I guess if I'd had a crystal ball I'd have come to my senses immediately and gone looking for a decent job just like any other normal, sensible guy. But I figured if men like Gauguin had managed it I owed it to them, to myself, and to my unsuspecting muse Madeleine to keep trying and even go beyond what they had achieved.

During that winter of 1973 when I spent every Sunday on my pitch in London at Green Park I got to know my neighbour Grant who had his pitch next to mine. He sold tie 'n' dye tee shirts and took an interest in my amateur-looking daubs. 'I really like your paintings Brian. You deserve success,' Grant told me 'your work is powerful and interesting.' I didn't believe that, but I hoped it might at least look 'promising'.

Sometimes to warm ourselves up in the biting cold we'd leave our pitches and race each other across Green Park. Then one day a young beggar came onto my pitch and asked me for a pound.

'No-can-do mate, I'm sorry, I'm skint,' I said, but he persists, and in the end I tell him to fuck off.

'No *you* fuck off.' He answered refusing to budge. He was wearing threadbare jeans in an era when it wasn't cool to wear denims specially ripped and torn to look scruffy, and a thick, moth-eaten old grey sweater. Long, lank dirty blonde hair.

'I can't fuck off, this is my pitch, I can't leave, this is all my stuff here, I'm working here, *you* fuck off. You'll be driving my clients away!'

'Your clients eh? And where might they be? O.K. I'll fuck off if you give me a pound. But if you don't pay me to fuck off then I'll just stay here queering your pitch, that's the deal. Call it insurance money.'

'What d'you mean, "insurance money" Insurance against what?'

'Well, since this is a public place I'm entitled to be here just as much as you are, so it's insurance against you having to be lumbered with my company for as long as I choose,' and suddenly he gives such a cheeky big grin it looks as if his mouth is trying to go AWOL.

'Oh I see, well in that case, here's a quid, now will you please fuck off?'

'Sure, here I go,' he said examining the note by holding it up to see the watermark near the Queen's head before he slipped it in his trouser pocket, 'but I'll be back...see you next week.'

He started to walk away, but I called him back.

'Look, d'you wanna earn yourself another coupla quid?'

*'Earn? Doing what?'*

*'Sit right down there on that wall and let me draw you for half hour or so,'* I said getting out my sketch pad and pencil. *'I need the practise.'*

So Eddy came into my life and turned out to be good company as well as a patient and reliable model. Also he'd run little errands for me or look after my pitch if I wanted to break up a long day and wander off from time to time.

The next week Eddy turned up 'for work' in a charcoal grey business suit, immaculate white shirt, black tie, and black shoes so highly polished he could have shaved himself in them. He seemed more prepared for my funeral than hanging out with me at Green Park and sitting for his portrait. From then on, while Eddy looked after my pitch, I started venturing across the road into Half Moon Street to explore Shepherds market. In those days there was a small café called the Inkwell down a tiny cobbled back alley with second-hand book shops, jewellers, a shoe shop, and lingerie shop. It had orange Formica tables, in little alcoves with oak panelling all around them where you'd find solitary souls reading and writing with their croissants and coffee, friends playing chess, discussing some new arthouse movie or a novel, or softly reading aloud a poem they'd written to their companion. Jazz played quietly in the background. Prostitutes went in there during breaks between clients and from time-to-time one or two would sit with me, occasionally chat to me about the weather, the fuel crisis, maybe flirt with me a little, and so on. There was one girl in particular I vividly recall. I was sitting by myself in an alcove sipping a Cappuccino and this girl in her early twenties smiled at me and asked gently *'D'you mind if I sit here?'*

The small room was packed and no other seating spaces were available so I didn't assume she was particularly drawn to me. She was slim and pretty with her dark hair bobbed, lips painted alluringly the colour of 'poisoned' blood. She had on a cream-coloured raincoat with wide lapels and she'd tied the belt around her middle without bothering to thread the buckle, casually as though it were a dressing gown, just like the romantic heroes and heroines of noir films from the 30s and 40s, Bogart, Bergman, or Bacall. She sat opposite me leafing through a small leather-bound notebook that looked like her diary for it

was closely packed with a neat black forest of inked handwriting that made me wonder about her bush. She took out an expensive-looking Watermans from her breast pocket removed the cap and made a few notes that I'd have had to stand on my head to read. She put the pen and notebook away, and sat in silence apparently gazing at her reflection in the tiny pond of coffee she held in her cup between both hands. After a while she put her cup down and removed her scarf and raincoat – just slipping it off her shoulders without standing up and then letting it fall behind her to drape over the back of her chair.

Underneath she had on a small black dress imprinted with daisies, which started large on the bodice then got smaller and smaller as they cascaded down the skirt until they resembled a galaxy of tiny, tumbling stars. The bodice was *décolletage* showing the tops of her small breasts, which were the colour of fresh milk. There was a small perfectly round black mole at the base of her throat by her prominent right clavicle. She took a sip of her Americano, set the cup down and took out a pack of *Disque Bleu* cigarettes, flicked two up, offered me one. Her nails were cut short ready for anything her special line of work might present her with.

'Er, no thanks, they're too strong for me...*etes vous Francais?*'

She smiled: '*Moi?* Oh no, I'm from Edinburgh, but some of us Scottish girls have strong tastes too!' I liked the soft strong burr of her voice, her accent.

'Oh? Really – in everything?'

'Nearly everything – that is, if we're talking about what I think we're talking about.'

'What are *you* talking about.'

'That's for me to know and for you to find out...that is, if you're interested.'

'I'm only a starving artist – I couldn't afford you.'

'Are you a painter then?'

'I guess I am, after a fashion. So happens I have my pitch just up the road, opposite Half Moon Street, along the railings at Green Park.'

'That sounds romantic and interesting, what's your work like?'

I lit her cigarette with an 'Inkwell' book match.

'Come and have a look if you like.'

We introduced ourselves. Her name was Eva.

She took a few drags on her cigarette and then stubbed it out.

I watched, fascinated at the neat and casual way she slipped her raincoat back on and tied the belt, her small, strong, shapely hands with their neatly trimmed painted finger nails were like my mother's which when I was a small boy used to brutally beat me and play the piano (not usually at the same time although maybe it could have worked in the same spirit as *that* scene in the Kubrick movie 'The Clockwork Orange'). I admired her heels – lemon green sling backs which almost matched the colour of her eyes and the creamy hues of her raincoat. She had on black lacy stockings with an intricate pattern of flowers imprinted on them, either daisies or margheritas, and I wondered whether they were tights or whether she was wearing a suspender belt. She was actually a very smart, lovely-looking girl.

I introduced Eva to Grant who was looking after my pitch while Eddy had also gone walkabout and to beg elsewhere. There was good pickings for him in Mayfair, especially up Burlington Arcade, although these days he looked more like a young, about-town businessman than a beggar – all he needed to complete his outfit was a bowler and umbrella. Since there was very little I could offer him, maybe while he was in that area he might get offered a proper job in a jeweller's. Eva smiled when she saw my announcement about St Paul's being on loan from the Great Liberace. I didn't explain. She didn't say anything at all about my paintings. I guess she thought they were pretty small beer, I was disappointed in her lack of interest and she saw it.

'You know what Brian,' she said, 'you look like you could really use a nice big cuddle.'

'I told you already, I'm skint.'

'That's why.'

'Why what?'

‘That’s why you need a cuddle. It’s four o’clock, you look done in. Why don’t you call it a day, gather up all your stuff and come back to mine.’

Eva’s home where she lived and worked was a tiny attic up three narrow flights of stairs in an old stucco-façade townhouse a few streets away from The Inkwell. The stairs and landings were being decorated and scraps of scraped-off wallpaper and plaster lay over the carpet. There were still patches of old wallpaper hanging on the walls with a *fleur de lit* design on it.

‘I’m sorry to see the old wallpaper go,’ Eva said.

‘You like flowers a lot, don’t you?’

‘Yes, but I quite like the shabby, scraped-down look it has now too – it makes me feel something real and homely that I’m sure I won’t get from something fresh and new. I like old worn-out things – furniture, antiques, churches, waste lots, ruined buildings, people. It’s nostalgic I guess.’

‘You’d have enjoyed being in me and my brother’s gang playing in the bombed-out buildings in the East End in 1940s during the war.’

‘You had gang fights then?’

‘Yes, we’d tear down the old rafters from the roofs and ceilings, sharpen one end, and put a paper flight on the other to make arrows for our bows which we made with thick bamboo canes we nicked from allotments. We had air guns, knives, and catapults too which we bought from sports shops. Webleys they were and we’d save up our pocket and paper round money, go in and buy them even though we were only little kids aged three, four, or five. We all smoked too – you know, dog-ends we’d pick up from the pavements and in the gutters.

‘My big brother was killed during an air raid on Glasgow, and the town still has bombed-out houses everywhere. That funny sweet-biscuit smell that the bombs left still lingers in the ashes and the ruins.’

‘Oh, sorry about your brother.’

I sat down on Eva’s bed and glanced around her tiny flat. Although it was clean, there was a temporary, makeshift, surprisingly unprofessional look to everything. She didn’t have a bookshelf but there were a number of

paperbacks scattered in little piles around the edges of the room. I can't recall the titles of many of them, but I do remember she had the essays of Michel Montaigne, *The Great Gatsby*, and well-used copies of novels by Dostoyevsky none of which I'd read myself at that time. 'What's that book about?', I asked her, pointing to "The Idiot," at the top of a pile, too knackered to get up and retrieve it for myself. Eva told me that it was about a man, Prince Mishkin who falls in love with the image of a beautiful woman in a photograph, just like in the film 'Laura' when the detective Dana Andrews falls in love with a woman in a painting who has disappeared and is presumed dead. Eva explained that Dostoevsky wanted to present Prince Mishkin, as a perfectly beautiful human being, and in being so perfect he ruins other people's lives for, like Christ in many ways, the world just didn't know what to make of him. The prince, in spirit, inhabits some absolute moral world in which both sexually damaged women and gawkily innocent girls are consciously attracted to him for the unthreatening, often comforting kindness and selflessness he offers them and yet, against their own moral judgement they are also unconsciously repulsed by these very same qualities which they find tedious for the same reason that many people would find a do-gooder type of man tedious because women who are achingly alive in the real world yearn for some frisson of amateness and, just like Jesus, no matter how abundant the 'goodness' he exuded how could he be fully human and satisfy their human needs if he has no sexual experience or desire whatever and behaves as if he is neutered? I felt too poorly to discuss this with her right then, but looking back decades later now having since read the book several times I think that perhaps Eva, with her personal insight or feminine tuition was hinting at some lack she sensed in me which, probably exacerbated by my repressive Roman Catholic upbringing, has all my life caused some measure of anguish and guilt, but, like most men of my age in those days I don't think I'd have developed the tools of thought to dig up from my unconscious the words to describe my ideas and feelings that went on in my inner world and thus enable me to fully engage emotionally or intellectually with Eva.

Her taste in music was eclectic - we listened to her recordings of Leonard Cohen, Pink Floyd, Miles Davis, and Mahler. She loved 'the Songs of a Wayfaring Stranger.' I lay on her little bed in her arms for a long time. She felt warm and smelt nice. I was enfolded by a lovely atmosphere of peace that I'd seldom felt before unless I was walking through a wood or down a long country lane or, eight years later, when I was living in Sudan on the edge of the Sahara desert by the Blue Nile. Although all my adult life I'd been used to lots

of raw and passionate, boozy one-night stands, apart from my blissful summer with Jaqueline until then I'd hardly known any tenderness in my whole life before. That was the culture of survival I was born into and grew up in. My background in the East End of London as a child had been one of coldness and violence, never a cuddle from my mother or a kind word, only scoldings and severe beatings for the most trivial of misdemeanours like, for example, once when I was three I'd forgotten to pick up the clean hanky my mother had washed, ironed, neatly folded and put out for me to take to the Roman Catholic convent school I'd walked to by myself along St Anne's Road Tottenham, London every morning. On arriving home that afternoon six hours later she was lying-in-wait behind the front door for me with the copper stick in her hand to set about me even before I had had a chance to put my gas mask down and get my satchel and school blazer off. The copper stick was a solid length of wood like a cricket stump used by housewives to stir up the clothes in the copper – a big zinc three-legged boiler – every Monday which was the weekly washing day and which us kids nicknamed 'blue Monday' because the weekend was over and to ram the message home our mothers had a mountain of dirty clothes to get through in a filthy temper which they'd boil in the copper in the scullery with Persil and 'blues', blues being tablets of blue detergent they'd toss on top of the clothes in a small string bag. Tuesday was hanging day when the clothes would be pegged up all day to dry in the breeze on the rope line strung across the backyard between the coal shed and the chicken run, and Wednesday was ironing day - another exhausting day. Our mothers had developed great big muscles on their forearms like Popeye's, not from eating tins of spinach but from turning the handle of the mangle or wringer to squeeze the water out of the clothes they'd washed and rinsed. We knew from watching American films down The Fleapit (our local cinema, real name The Corner) that electric washing machines and spin dryers had been invented but they weren't to come the way of poor people like us for another ten years after the war when we bought them on the never-never. A copper stick, wielded in the powerful hands of working-class mothers like mine in their most psychopathic rages could inflict deep bruising on their kids or even break bones and frequently did. It wasn't unusual for a woman to take her child up to the hospital having instructed him or her that if they didn't tell the doctor that they'd hurt themselves falling out of a bombed-out building in which they'd

been playing, or off the swings in the park, or down the stairs at home they'd get another good hiding when she got them home. But they must have loved us, our mums, for, despite the bombs and poverty and having no husbands for they were away at the Front fighting the war they clothed and fed us, put up decorations and a great big tree at Christmas decked out with bunting, fairy lights, and mystery presents wrapped in fancy paper and tied with ribbon; filled the stockings that hung over the ends of our beds with tangerines and little toys and said it was Father Christmas who'd climbed down the chimney who did it; baked mince pies and a great big ice and marzipan cake with candles and little figures on it; pulled crackers with us and wore silly paper hats with us, hid a silver sixpence in the Christmas pudding, gave us little treats on our birthdays, and replaced any milk teeth we'd put under our pillow with a silver sixpence and said it was the tooth fairy. My mum told me how when she was carrying me, her mother – my grandmother – bumped into her on the street in the autumn of 1941. She was wheeling a pram with my sister Mary in it while my four year old brother Tommy ran in and out of the ruined houses.

'You're pregnant again you dirty bitch!'

My grandmother hit my mother over the head with the empty stout bottle she was carrying and then continued on her way to the off-licence on the corner to redeem her half-penny on it. That night my grandmother was all but extinguished when several houses in our street were demolished in a German air raid. But I don't think it was either of these two traumatic incidents that caused me to be born five months later with the rare and insidious brain tumour that over the next half century grew and grew in my head like a pearl in an oyster and created both the monster and the god.

When I awoke Eva was dressed again, this time in a red leather sheath mini skirt, very low cut black lace blouse and six inch stilettos.

'Sorry sweetheart, it's nearly eight and you'll have to go. I need to start work soon, I'll have clients coming up here.'

I got up, and, feeling very groggy, dressed. I had a headache from hell. Eva made me a cup of tea and a cheese sandwich and sat on the bed with me while she painted her lips and nails. She glanced at me solicitously.

'Take your time,' she said. 'My god, you're so skinny, sweetheart, you don't look well. You look like shit. Are you alright?'

'I'm O.K., but it's just that I've had a lot of pain from a stomach ulcer recently and right now I've got a bit of a headache.'

'Look, love, stay if you like, and I'll take the night off.'

'You're an angel, but I know you can't afford to do that. Don' worry, I'll be alright.'

'Have you got your train fare back home?'

'Sure.' Suddenly I felt such an intense pressure in my head I thought it would burst. I was glad that, having failed to sell again, this time I wouldn't have to walk the seventy miles back home on a seventeen hour journey to the coast all though the night in freezing November rain like I had a few weeks before.

'Are you coming up again next Sunday to your pitch?'

'Yes, I'm there every week.'

'Then there's no need to carry you work all that way back to Bracklesham Bay. Since you're coming back, you can leave your paintings here...if you trust me?'

'Sure I trust you. Thanks, that's cool.'

Eva finished her lips and nails, sat before the dressing table mirror brushing her hair. She glanced at her wristwatch:

'There's still time left before you go.'

'Time for what?'

'You *know* what. Then afterwards you can do a little drawing of me. You can sign it, I'd frame it and hang it on my wall. Fair exchange?' But I felt patronised. It sounded like a mercy fuck to me.

'Eva you look sensational, but no, it's too late and too soon. I'd need to romance you a little first. I'll be here next Sunday morning around eleven.'

But I was too ill to go up the following week. I didn't know it then, but my one-in-a-million brain cancer which all my life had been growing had started giving

me early symptoms, which, thirty-five years later resulted in disastrous, cack-handed brain surgery at Hurstwood Park, followed by three months of damaging Proton beam radiotherapy in Florida and eleven years of abuse, lying and cover up by the NHS consultants, a succession of weak GPs and the Ombudsman while the clock ran down on me like an egg timer, the grains of sand slipping down like the moments left I had to make something of my life. It was a month before I was strong enough to return to my pitch at Green Park, which, when I got there I realised was no longer my pitch. By default it was Eddy's. 'Sorry mate,' he said, 'we didn't think you were coming back.' Grant had gone walkabout. I checked out Eddy's stuff. Snide Russian icons he'd concocted by cutting out reproductions of old masters from library books and gluing them to pocket-sized pieces of wood which he'd then roughed up, and varnished over. I sighed 'How much?'

'D'you really want one, they're only fakes?!

'So's the whole bleedin' Solar System mate. As William S. Burroughs said "Everything is permitted, nothing is real."'

When I called at Eva's flat she'd disappeared, along with all my paintings.

The new occupant, a hatchet-faced dishwater blonde who looked like she could hack you to death like a woodpecker without taking her hands out of her pockets told me Eva had left suddenly a few days ago. She'd left no forwarding telephone number or address and Hatchet-Face had no idea where she'd gone. I noticed the new wallpaper on the narrow stairs landing and hall was a bilious yellow, already badly scuffed from either Eva moving her stuff out or Hatchet-Face moving hers in, or maybe by the latter having a tuppenny upright with her tin opener of a beak pressed against the wall. Anyway, who knows, maybe the wallpaper was the reason Eva left.

On my way back to the underground station I glanced across the street at Eddy to wave him the long goodbye. Frantically, he beckoned me over.

'Brian, forgot to tell you. That pianist, you know, *What'sisface* came here two Sundays ago looking for you.'

'*Liberace?! No shit?, nah, you're just rubbing it in.'*

'Yeah, no shit, the very geezer mate, Liberace!' (Eddy pronounced the last four letters of his name *race* as in *running race*). 'He was flying back to Hollywood the next day and seemed disappointed not to have his painting to take back with him.'

'Was he pissed off with me?'

'Nah, I don't reckon so. He didn't even mention the money he paid you. That wasn't the issue, I guess that was peanuts to him. He just liked your painting of St Paul's and wanted to hang it up on the wall over his grand piano in Beverly Hills. That was his big ambition, he said, to do a concert in the cathedral of St Paul's. He reckoned it must be the most beautiful and important building in London. He said he remembered how during the London Blitz, Winston Churchill said on the wireless "whatever happens, we must save St Paul's." I didn't know that, I wasn't around then.'