The permanent struggle for hope: Three suburban pieces

Tony Ullyatt

The home sweet home paranoia syndrome

[Variations on two themes by David Cooper]

From the womb we are born into the box of the family from which we progress into the box of the school. By the time we leave school we have become so conditioned to being in a box that from then on we erect our own box, prison, bin around us – until, finally with relief, we are put into the coffin or the oven.

David Cooper

There is no hope. There is only permanent struggle. That is our hope.

David Cooper

back then, in the 60s, most folks lived in 'boxes, little boxes, made of ticky-tacky'
they even crooned about those home sweet homes in clichéd pretty sing-song ditties
nowadays, the ticky-tacky is more sumptuous each box fitted out with all mod cons barricades of Devil’s fork screaming alarms and blinding lights all unlikely to bring anyone running from their homes for fear they might get killed or worse still maimed in some wanton mêlée
the ageing canary that hung in a cage from a skew verandah beam chirped his last Carpe Diem long ago
a steel-barred cage prevents the thieves from being led into temptation and absconding with our cars at night guns lie zealously under the bed poised for the instant the dogs of war begin to snap and snarl we do our Sunday oblations armoured in the certainty God will deliver us from evil but just in case we beseech the help of Devil’s fork to keep the demons out our churches and to keep the demons in our mental asylums and old-age homes while graveyards nestle in the keen embrace of razor-wire and fences even the dead must feel secure although we’re on our own in the suburbs we’ll never be lonely
wedded as we are to the terror and its shadow
they settle in
colonising our minds
making themselves at home like family
unpacking their paranoid baggage

meanwhile
incarcerated in our fragile tin-roofed forts
we do battle with our daily dread
unlikely unwilling or unable
to forgive those who trespass against us
the ineffable questions sired in the shadow of death
still torment us

paranoia /parəˈnɔɪə/ noun.
[Origin: Modern Latin from Greek, from paranoos distracted, formed as para-¹ + nous, nous = mind]
1. Orig., dementia. Now, a mental illness characterized by delusions of persecutions, unwarranted jealousy, or exaggerated self-importance.
2. A tendency to suspect and distrust others or to believe oneself unfairly used.

syndrome /ˈsɪndrəʊm/ noun.
[Origin: Modern Latin from Greek sundromē, from sun- syn- + drom- dromein run.] A group of symptoms or pathological signs which consistently occur together; a condition characterized by such a set of associated symptoms.

Shorter Oxford English dictionary

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Suffer, little children
[Variations on a theme of Mary Lamb]

A child’s a plaything for an hour*

Mary Lamb

her father
robust city councillor, stout pillar of the church
taught her the tricks of pleasuring him
when she was five or six
he always waited until her mother had gone to work
too small to clamber over the Devil’s fork
she was too small for revenge
she loathed the sight of him
especially afterwards
and on Sundays in church
resting his paternal hand high up on her thigh
nothing sacred there
like a spectator at an execution her mother smiled
her Sunday smile
dear jesus the child would pray i could come to heaven now
and be with you safe for ever and ever
but jesus must have been busy with more important things
when at last her father had a heart attack -
the notion of a defenceless assault pleased her -
she listened to the crematorium’s fiery furnace
then threw his ashes on the wind-swept rubbish dump
- another wicked irony -
but still
the tendrils of her wretchedness coil relentlessly about her

*This quotation comes from Lamb’s book entitled, ironically, Parental recollections.

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‘To love, honour, and obey’

[Variations on a theme of William Shakespeare]

Such duty as the subject owes his prince
Even such a woman oweth her husband*

William Shakespeare

for years she felt the weekdays go by
with every blow every clout every punch every pummel every hit
every smack every strike every bash
every flat of the hand every fist
MONday-TUESday-WEDnesDAY-THURSday-FRIday
then
the weekends came around as unstoppable
as his pulverising barrage
her face swollen eyes shut lips split
jaw broken ribs cracked
so she could scarcely breathe
some teeth gone too
then he’d weep and blamed the drink
he couldn’t give up
if the truth be known he wouldn’t give up
he’d tried so many times and failed over and over
he beat her for that
then he’d weep
she said she would leave
he beat her for that
then he’d weep
she said she would call the police
he beat her for that
then he’d weep
she said she would take the kids
he beat her for that
then he’d weep
she took refuge with friends
he beat her for that
then he’d weep
she even said she loved him
he beat her for lying
then he’d weep and weep
making promises she knew he could never keep
in fact would never keep
or even make an effort to
he was still snivelling and grovelling and pleading
when she blew his brains out
using the revolver he’d threatened her with
umpteen times before

his family said she was the worst thing that ever happened to this good man
he was kind and gentle and loving and a wonderful father
but
his brutish language
attached completely different meanings
to the terrible words
she discovered in his dictionary by mistake
kindness
gentleness
forgiveness
love

* The taming of the shrew V.ii.156

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