

2016

I'm on a train back to my childhood, as though it still exists, as tangible and re-visitible as the place I left behind. Although it feels a hundred years ago and a thousand miles away, it is – nonetheless – actually only fifty-three minutes on the train, with one change, from what is now my nearest station, Finchley Road & Frognal. The last time I took this train was probably thirty years ago. I wouldn't have had a phone in my bag. No one would. I wouldn't have had a child, but I would still have had both parents. I would have been on my way to see them.

The London Overground train is packed, standing room only and air-conditioned to iciness, yet it still has that city buzz which is a kind of warmth, everyone jostling prams and backpacks and suitcases, and it's busy in that city way, everyone heads down or engrossed in something, to try to create a tiny private space. Through Hampstead Heath and Gospel Oak, to Kentish Town West, which would have been my mum's nearest stop when she was growing up in London. Between here and Camden Road there are buildings going up beside the line, cranes in the sky everywhere you look, London still growing and still filling in

every gap. At Highbury & Islington I head to the platform for trains heading north, and the crowd thins out. By the time I am waiting for the train to Welwyn Garden City, there are only five people left, while at the far end a man whistles tunelessly and eerily, the notes fading away into the tunnel.

On the train, discarded copies of the *Metro* litter the seats, and we pull out of the station to a close-up view of the Emirates Stadium. Then Drayton Park, and a brand-new-looking, blue-clad block of flats, curved like a liner, and another clad in chequered tiles – blue and grey, green and grey, orange and grey. At Finsbury Park there is construction going on, orange-clad highly visible workmen loiter beside pile drivers. This would have been Dad's nearest stop when he was growing up in London. The scenery is still an urban blur of Victorian terraced houses backing on to the line, window boxes and washing, depots and warehouses, graffiti sprayed on the blackened brickwork. At Harringay, a builders' yard, 'cement and plasterboard', industrial grey corrugated-iron sheds, while at Hornsey, the tall gold dome of the London Islamic Cultural Society and Mosque is visible from the station. Up on a hill to the left, Alexandra Palace, where Dad roller-skated as a child, sits in splendour, and at the station the train begins to empty out. What looks like a huge abandoned factory is covered in hard-edged, geometric graffiti, and then there's a long tunnel, and an industrial estate, planks and pallets, and piles and piles of bricks.

I've brought a sandwich with me to eat on the train, as if I imagine there won't be any food to be had this far north

of the city, as if I'm going off exploring into the wilds. Although, on the other hand, it is also quite suburban of me to have brought a sandwich. A train picnic for a journey lasting fifty-three minutes. At New Southgate there's a change of style, the houses no longer Victorian or Edwardian, but more like 1960s or '70s. Low blocks of flats and a car park, a line of pine trees, and then another long tunnel, followed by more greenery, more trees beside the line, tags on concrete amid the leaves.

Oakleigh Park is the first stop outside the London post-code, and it merges into New Barnet, modern semi-detached housing and flats, small gardens with washing lines, sheds and plastic greenhouses, the kind of suburbia that is true urban sprawl, the shallow waters of the city. The train is almost empty, which gives me the creeps, increasing the feeling that I'm leaving behind the bustle and safety of the crowd. It gets quieter and quieter, although inside my head the noise seems to be getting louder, competing thoughts crowding in, a faint sound in the background that might be a scream, and a voice saying quite insistently, 'Am I really doing this? Am I really going there?' More fields and trees appear, I think I'm seeing the actual Green Belt before my eyes. It's another reason for this journey, for this whole project, my realisation that the kind of suburbia I grew up in is endlessly fascinating to me. I think of John Updike's line about trying in his writing to give 'the mundane its beautiful due', and I've always liked that notion of turning the gaze upon the commonplace, or the overlooked. There's nothing especially beautiful about where I came from, and yet its role in my life is huge, and

there's something inherently respectful, isn't there, about properly looking at a place, paying it the compliment of being worthy of attention?

Another tunnel, then Hadley Wood, hawthorn in blossom, buddleia heavy with last year's rusty, dead flower heads. A huge willow tree, brambles and rosebay willow herb. Open countryside, gently hilly fields separated by hedgerows, and then another tunnel. All these tunnels! I'd never noticed them before, was never paying any attention, and yet here they've been, ever since the railway had to find a way through the chalky hills surrounding the London Basin.

Nearly there now. Potters Bar. A car park, a Sainsbury's, a view of the high street shops, and very definitely suburban. We're not in London any more, Toto. Silver birches, a Union Jack flying, the golf course on the right, and the car park where, years after I'd left, and playing no part in my story except for the way it slightly haunts me, a murder took place. A field full of solar panels to the left, and then here we are, houses nestling in the gentle green: Brookmans Park.

Brookmans Park, in the county of Hertfordshire, sits in a sea of green just off the coast of London. Not a river, but a railway runs through it, and is the reason for its existence. The station – opened by the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) on 19 July 1926 – is located fourteen miles north of Kings Cross on the East Coast Main Line, making it the perfect spot for a commuter village, which duly developed from the 1930s onwards. I was born there, in the front bedroom of our house, in 1962 and spent my childhood believing that I lived in a village in the countryside. I rarely ventured further than the primary school round the corner, or the shops that clustered round the village green, perhaps stopping to give a sugar lump to the horse in the pasture near the station. There were three directions out of the village and whichever one you took, you'd soon be driving past fields.

There was a livery stable called Raybrook Farm, where I would go with my friend Liz who'd ride a pony, while I hung around, not wanting to ride a pony. Next to the primary school was Peplins Wood, where we took nature walks, carrying laminated sheets of facts about squirrels and oak

trees, native plants and beetles, an only slightly more formalised version of filling in an I-Spy book. We'd collect tadpoles in the spring, and make an excursion to see the bluebells, a vivid carpet the colour of a child's eyes, which seemed to pull the sky down into the woods. Although when we played in the woods in the summer holidays, the air of innocence was dispelled as we built dens and formed gangs, boys vs girls, and menace hung in the air. Later on when I read *Lord of the Flies*, and watched *Blue Remembered Hills*, I had an inkling of what had seemed so namelessly frightening.

My friends' houses backed on to fields, and one summer evening, aged about eight, I got lost in the tall wheat with Sandra. By the time I'd reached home, late and in trouble, my eyes were streaming and bloodshot with hayfever. I'd been scared. The meadows had seemed suddenly alien and pathless, with no obvious route through them. I'd feared being lost, being late, being followed; that darkness would fall and trap us there, in the chill that falls on an English field at dusk, even at the end of a warm day.

At Gobions Wood – the remnants of an old estate, now a public park – Dad and my brother Keith would go fishing beside the lake at 5 a.m., next to other men and their sons, dressed in olive green, silent in the dawn with flasks of tea. The lake dried out in the heatwave summer of 1976 and would freeze over in winter, daring us to skate on it in defiance of the Public Information films we watched at school. There was a playground there, where teenagers hung out on the swings, or lounged on the heavy wooden roundabout that needed the heft of two people to get moving. But it was less a place to play, more a place to smoke.

In autumn crab apples lay squashed on the pavement, and in the damp air hung the smell of a bonfire: Mum at the back of the garden burning leaves and rubbish in a metal incinerator; Dad gathering sharp Cox's Orange Pippin apples and wrapping them in newspaper. Winter brought snow, and as late as Easter one year enough fell that we made an igloo in the garden, using sheets of glassy ice from the pond to form a skylight roof, like a modern Scandi hotel. Summer was spent in the garden, each of us given a patch to plant, marked out with pebbles and sea shells, filled with marigolds and snapdragons. We'd open up furry lupin seed heads to find the tiny pearls within, and earn pocket money by weeding out the chickweed and speedwell.

But most of what we did with nature was kill it: gathering rose petals to make perfume in a jam jar, wondering why after only five minutes it would settle into a stagnant stinky pond, or putting caterpillars into a shoe box with leaves, and holes poked in the lid, and wondering why they'd shrivel and die within a day or two. We'd pop the buds on the fuchsia despite Dad telling us it would kill the flowers. Our garden backed onto that of the Griffin family, with an old oak tree between us, beneath which they kept a rabbit in a hutch. We looked after it one year while they were on holiday, and rats broke in. When we went to feed and give it water, we found it dead in the cage. Blood on the white fur.

I took part every year in the fête at the primary school, which was called Village Day. The usual bric-a-brac and cake stalls, tombola and coconut shy, sat alongside a maypole, around which I learned to dance. What could be more rural, more ancient and traditional than that? It sounds authentic and historical, but like everything else, Village Day was new, started by the primary school headmaster in order to raise money to build the swimming pool in the late 1950s. We would freeze there in summer, in armbands and skirted costumes, kicking up and down with white polystyrene floats. I discovered recently that the pool has since been filled in.

Nearby there were places with REAL history. St Albans, where I started going in my teens, had Roman ruins. An abbey. Georgian and Victorian houses. Private schools, one each for girls and boys. A medieval clock tower, beneath which we would meet in order to go and drink in the medieval pub, The Boot. In Hatfield was Hatfield House, dating from 1611 and sitting near the remains of an even earlier royal palace, childhood home of Elizabeth I. There are Grade II-listed seventeenth-century houses in Old

Hatfield, but also nearby, Grade II-listed Modernist houses. Buildings that were properly old, or properly new.

Brookmans Park, in contrast, had no history at all, it was a bland, characterless development of little boxes that sprang up overnight somehow, in a void. Nothing was here before it was built; it was a stage set dropped onto an empty landscape. Or so I thought until I started looking. In fact, like all land in England, it had belonged to someone, for a long time the same family, the Gaussens, who owned the Brookmans estate. A mansion, with its park and fields and woods, was bought in 1786 by Peter Gaussen, Governor of the Bank of England, for £16,000, and his family would live there for the next 135 years.

In 1891 the manor house was destroyed by fire while the owner was cruising on his yacht, and the house was never rebuilt, the family instead converting the stable block into their home. In 1906 the estate was handed on to daughter Emilia and her husband, Hubert Ponsonby Loftus Tottenham. Financial difficulties followed, loans and mortgages, the downward trajectory of landowning families, and after 1914 parts of the estate began to be sold off, the family living in reduced scale in their converted stable. The end came in 1923 when 969 acres of their land was bought by a syndicate of developers, who formed a company, Brookmans Park (Hatfield) Ltd, in order to construct a commuter village.

Originally the plan was for a garden city, along the lines of Welwyn Garden City, the second garden city in England, which was founded in 1920 only five miles away. There would have been a town square, and a much bigger, more

urban development, but the scheme was gradually scaled down. After the railway station opened in July 1926, building began. Right from the start there were disputes about the necessity of what we'd call affordable housing, but which were then referred to as 'workmen's cottages'. In 1928 the only subsidised houses were built – more were planned, but never materialised, as the developers claimed they couldn't afford to build properties that would command a lower rent. Already much of the housing was aspirational rather than affordable, and some existing homeowners objected to the building of bungalows – the dispute was settled when it was agreed to build a 'better class of bungalow'.

A better class of bungalow.

2016

I step off the train, up and over the footbridge, feeling a swerve of vertigo on the open-tread steps, remembering how my mum had real trouble going up and down them, thrown off balance by the sight of the drop. There's a view of sharp, fresh green all around, oak trees by the road bridge, the footpath already fuzzy with goose grass. A sign reads, 'To the Shops and the Golf Course', and another, reassuringly, 'CCTV is looking after you here'. There are sixteen new luxury homes being built right next to the station, a small development that must have broken through the red tape of planning and the outrage of local opposition. The battles of the Green Belt are still being fought here: debate rages about new housing proposals, many residents wanting to stop Brookmans Park itself expanding, and thus filling in the green space between it and London. It's a hot local topic.

Down from the station, the village shops stand exactly as they did, no change in style or size, only in the goods they sell or services they provide. Cutting It Fine, the hair salon, sits next to a wine seller that was a long-established off-licence, then a new osteopath practice and a takeaway

offering kebabs/burgers/pizza. A dry cleaner's, a tea room, and Methi Indian Cuisine, which used to be the wool shop. One of FOUR estate agents, one of SIX beauty salons, followed by Raj Indian Cuisine, and the Wing Wah Garden, which opened in 1977. The first place offering 'foreign' food, it brought a literal taste of the outside world and exposed all our limitations and prejudices. A local family said they'd move if a Chinese takeaway opened, which gave rise to a truly memorable row at my house, when my mum argued that it wasn't just people in Brookmans Park who thought like that, to which I replied, 'No, Brookmans Park doesn't have a monopoly on racism!' I was proud of my use of the word monopoly, which I'd only just learned, and expected cheers, but instead it provoked fury and then silence. I hear myself saying it now and I sound a bit smug. A bit teenage. But I still think I was right.

I turn left at the fishmonger, and pass a small green-grocer (closed on Thursdays), another hair studio, and a dental practice where the garage used to be. The chemist is where the chemist always used to be, and next to it a Co-op where the supermarket always used to be, and where I had my first Saturday job. Two more estate agents, the Beauty in the Park salon, Groomers on the Green (dogs) in the lovely curved 1930s shopfront that was a green-grocer/pet shop. I'm delighted to see that the library is still here and still open, and the bakery is still a bakery, and the newsagent is still a newsagent, and the toyshop is still a toyshop, and the butcher's is still a butcher's, and the hairdresser's is still a hairdresser's, although now called a hair boutique. Peering through the window, I see the

half-moon tables, and curly backed chairs, and overhead driers, unchanged since the 1970s.

The DIY store is another Chinese restaurant. Amazing that the population has survived the introduction of no less than four places selling ‘foreign’ food. You might almost think people turned out to like it after all. Bringing us bang up to date, there is Body in Balance, specialising in sorting out back pain, and finally, in place of the bank, an Organic Dry Cleaner’s. The same number of shops as there ever were, thirty-nine, and so many still the same.

As I walk around, I’m struck by how well the place seems to be doing. There is no atmosphere of rural decline. The closing of village shops and pubs, and local schools, and libraries, and the dwindling of rural bus and train services – Brookmans Park seems to have been spared most of this, in contrast to what we might call the ‘real’ countryside, which in many areas has suffered blight and neglect. There is money here, and the village has proved itself to be impervious to both change and decline. Some of the shops, and pavements and road surfaces, look a bit shabby, a bit in need of updating, but that’s the worst you could say. I walk up to look at the church, where the sound of fast trains going through is loud. Solar panels on a detached house.

1976

A pocket-sized diary with a red leather cover, measuring 4×3 inches. A week to two pages, it allowed enough room for three short sentences per day. On the front is the word 'Haig' and inside, beside a picture of two bottles, the words, 'Haig – Britain's Largest Selling Scotch Whisky. Don't Be Vague Ask For Haig'. There follow three or four pages of metric imperial conversion tables, the year's bank holidays, and then a 'Wine Chart', the years from 1948 to 1973 rated as a score of 0–7 for Claret, Red Burgundy, White Burgundy, Sauternes, Champagne and Port. And just to remind me where I didn't live, a tube map, and then a map of the West End, detailing for me the area between the Thames and Oxford Street, where I hardly ever went.

It begins just before the old year ended, with those entries from December 1975, about being unable to get a jumper or a skirt, buying nothing except a bag of chips, although the year ended on a high, with this triumphant entry for New Year's Eve: *'Liz came over in the morning, and I bought some things from the chemist.'*

I was thirteen years old, life was slow and even, and very little happened, over and over again. *'Deb and I went*

to St Albans, Hatfield, Potters Bar and Barnet!! Got nothing except a Peanuts writing pad.' 'Tried to phone Deb but no answer.' My emotional range was restricted to my feelings about David Essex, nothing and no one else seeming to rouse any passion in me; the films *That'll be the Day* and *Stardust* were described in detail, on a page decorated with love hearts, and the words 'sob sob' repeated. Those films tell the tale of a rock star's rise to glory and his descent into drug-addled failure, and I watched wide-eyed and open-mouthed, entranced by the beauty and the glamour of it all.

1976 began with snow, and I was off school with a cold. 'I went to Raybrook Farm,' and there was 'a heron in the garden. It tried to eat the goldfish.' Because of the limited local shops, I bought things from Mum's catalogue, and listed every tiny, insignificant purchase made when I did leave the house, 'Went to Welwyn, got a face pack.' To pass the time, like everyone else I watched a lot of telly, and the same telly as everyone else. Limited by three channels, we were bonded by watching and sharing the same few programmes, all of which I listed in my diary: *Supersonic*, *Upstairs Downstairs*, *Crossroads* and *Candid Camera* . . . *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *McCloud*, *New Faces* and *Ellery Queen* . . . *Who Do You Do?*, *Columbo*, *Survivors*, *Porridge* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* . . . *Call My Bluff*, *Bionic Man*, *New Avengers*, *Starsky & Hutch*, *Superstars* and *Kojak* . . . *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *Hawaii Five-O*. There'd be a film on Saturday night – *From Russia with Love*, *South Pacific*, *I'm All Right Jack* . . . *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *The Nutty Professor*.

Most of all I loved the comedy: *The Dave Allen Show*,

Faulty Towers, Morecambe and Wise, Tomkinson's Schooldays and *The Good Life*, which, of course, was a satire about suburbia, the idealistic Goods trying to exchange their suburban life for a more rural, meaningful one. It was funny, but also full of contemporary ideas about escaping the rat race, getting back to a utopian notion of self-sufficiency, living off the land. Tom Good suggested there was more value to this kind of life than could be found in modern Surbiton, though Margo and Jerry were there to provide the counterpoint, laughing at him and being laughed at in their turn. The kind of street they lived in, the kind of gardens they had, looked familiar to me, although I could see that my parents weren't much like the Goods – who were dungaree-wearing semi-hippies, unconventional and liberal – but were in fact more like Margo and Jerry: conservative, aspirational, repressed. The atmosphere in the Goods house was relaxed and cheerful, but next door, Margo was uptight, with no sense of humour, while Gerry was cowardly and trapped. And it wasn't hard to see that they were the villains, while the Goods were the good guys. That worried me a bit.

If TV programmes were limited, so was our access to music. I bought the David Essex single 'Rock On' from a friend, and on another day, *'Deb and I bought batteries for the tape recorder. It's really good. Taped Neil Sedaka, Pluto and Four Seasons.'* We'd never heard anyone say that home-taping was killing music. It wouldn't have meant anything to us. Home-taping was bringing some music into our house, and was one of the few ways we could do so, along with the radio, and Dial-a-Disc, where you'd sit at the phone

table in the hall and dial a certain number in order to listen to a tinny recording of the current number seven single.

Every weekday I listed my school lessons, wasting pages and pages on what was just my timetable – *‘English, maths, double cookery, hockey, double German, music, double science, Swimming!!’*

And here’s what a weekend looked like for a thirteen-year-old in 1976:

Saturday – *‘Liz and I went to Welwyn today. Got a face pack and a hideaway stick thingy. Went to Liz’s in the afternoon. Had a bath and washed hair. Saw some Winter Olympics. Bed at 10.30.’*

Sunday – *‘Did housework in morning and got 65p. Had roast lamb for din dins. Ordered a waistcoat from Freemans. Also a floor cushion. Saw M*A*S*H. Bed at 9.30.’*

Or the following weekend:

Saturday – *‘Got a letter from Anne. Went to Hatfield. Got earrings and mascara. Deb went to a disco. Liz stayed the night. Saw Upstairs Downstairs in bed.’*

Sunday – *‘Got up at 11. Went to shops. Liz stayed for dinner. Roast lamb, etc. Liz went home at 3.30. Tidied room. Wardrobe too. Listened to the charts. Bed at 9.’*

The diary is incredibly boring, and yet cheerful – there are no confessions of anything, just endless meals, lessons, bedtimes and shopping trips. A few pages where I changed

writing style or pen colour, and then an entry – *‘Isn’t this diary getting messy – sorry!?’* – which begs the question, who was I apologising to? Who was all this for? Who is ANY diary for? Such a catalogue of the humdrum, it would eventually mutate into a seething stew of truth and lies, revelation and concealment. In later years I would lie about what I was feeling, and one memorable day, even leave a page entirely blank, unable or unwilling to find words for what had happened.

Part of the problem was that I wasn’t convinced my diary was private, and had every reason to suspect that my mum would read it whenever possible. One day she’d made a casual remark about regretting having had kids, and I wrote a dramatic letter to a friend saying that this revelation had made me consider suicide, which wasn’t true in any real sense at all, but Mum found the unsealed letter on my bed, read it and confronted me. So I didn’t confide entirely to my diary, as I couldn’t be sure who I was telling – although a psychologist might have something to say about all of this. The unsealed letter, for instance. Why did I leave it like that, lying on my bed? Why didn’t I hide my diary properly? Why was I sometimes honest and sometimes not? You might think I was telling her certain things, hiding others. Testing limits. Sounding out a response.