

PREFACE

‘You look as if you wished the place in Hell,’
My friend said, ‘judging from your face.’ ‘Oh well,
I suppose it’s not the place’s fault,’ I said.
‘Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.’
(Philip Larkin: ‘I Remember, I Remember’)

When I try to summon up the past – when I want to remember what really happened, instead of what I think happened, and what I really felt, instead of what I’d like to think I felt, and what I really did, instead of what I say I did – I look at my diaries. They never fail to shock me with all the things they say, and all the things they don’t. Going right back to the start, I try to picture myself on the day I first decided to keep a diary: 29 December 1975, when I was thirteen years old. I must have been given it as a Christmas present, and although it was for the year 1976, its first few pages invited entries for the end of the previous year. So I began as the old year ended, just before it turned to face the new.

I would have settled down with a pen, riffled through

the year's worth of blank, empty pages before breaking it open at the very start, and then:

29 December 1975 – *‘Went to St Albans with Debbie. Got a belt. Could not get a jumper or skirt.’*

That's it, that's all she wrote. No starting with a bang, no announcing herself to the world, or to a future reader, no declaration of intent. Nothing along the lines of 'Dear Diary, draw closer and listen to what I have to say. Here I am; this is me; let me tell you the story of my life.' Not even the guileless enthusiasm of a thirteen-year-old self-introduction – 'Hello, I'm Tracey and this is my diary.' Instead, I draw a circle and leave it empty, my eye caught by an absence. And it wasn't an aberration; I carried on in that style for years, making countless entries about not buying things, not going to the disco, not going to school, a piano lesson being cancelled, the school coach not arriving. It's a life described by what's missing, and what fails to happen.

My second-ever entry is just as banal:

30 December – *‘Went to Welwyn with Liz. Didn't get anything except a bag of Kentucky chips.’*

Was it me or was it my surroundings? Was it just that I was the dullest child in existence, noticing nothing, experiencing nothing, thinking nothing, or was it at least in part an embodiment of something in the air, something vague and undefined? Even when I write about it now, I

realise that the time and place in which I grew up, 1970s suburbia, is easier to define by saying what it wasn't than what it was. Brookmans Park was a village but not a village. Rural but not rural. A stop on the line, a space in between two landscapes that are both more highly rated – the city, and the countryside. A contingent, liminal, border territory. In-betweenland.

1 January 1977 – *'Went to Welwyn with Mum and Dad to get some boots but couldn't get any.'*

8 January – *'Liz and I went to Potters Bar in the afternoon to try to get her ears pierced, but she couldn't.'*

Anywhere with a tube station, however 'end of the line' that stop may be, still feels to me like part of London, physically linked by the tunnels and rails. Things would still happen there. But beyond the reach of the Underground lies a different and less certain terrain. Where things might not happen at all. Where you might continually try but continually fail, in endless small endeavours.

19 January 1979 – *'Deb and I went to St Albans. Tried to get some black trousers but couldn't find any nice ones.'*

17 March – *'Tried to go to the library but it was shut.'*

When I came to write a song about the place, 'Oxford Street', I fell back into this habit of describing by subtraction, stating what wasn't there – 'Where I grew up there

were no factories’ – and only then going on to admit that ‘there was a school and shops, and some fields and trees’. But although there were fields, there was no agricultural life. No one worked as a farmer. All the men got on the train every morning with a briefcase to go up to town. Nature writers would have found little there to describe; it was not a place of shepherds, or hawks. There was no real scenery – no hills, or lakes, nothing in the way of a view.

Here I am again, talking about what it is not. What is it about the place that it demands to be written about in such an equivocal way? I rebelled as a teen and so have often felt there was a clean break between my past and my future – that I abandoned the old me and invented a new one, casting off the time and place I came from. But as I get older, I sense its presence inside me. I think I want to reconnect with the self I left behind. It’s partly that common impulse of curiosity – which informs a TV programme like *Who Do You Think You Are?* or a song like ‘Where Do You Go To My Lovely’. I want to look inside my head and remember just where I came from. Because I can’t quite believe it was as lacking as my diary suggests.

Like the negative of a photo, it’s as if the Technicolor version of life were happening elsewhere, full of events and successes, dreams and achievements. Meanwhile, whenever I tried to sum up the place where I lived and the life I was living, I would write over and over again: this didn’t happen, that didn’t happen. It’s neither one thing nor another, and I’m neither here nor there.

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.