

## ***The Head of Karl Marx***

***by: Arnold Levine***

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There was that sudden, reluctant awakening in the dead of night, knowing that something in the outside world had intruded into my dreams and was jolting me from the deep sleep of youth. I shifted in my bed. Blurry explanations began their sluggish way into my rousing consciousness and were sorted for consideration.

What was it this time? Another fiery car crash at the bottom of Highgate West Hill? The dangerously steep, narrow and curvy main road leveled out abruptly next to Cavours Hardware Shop where it intersected with Swains Lane, before it continued on south as the sedate Highgate Road. My view from the second floor window of our family's maisonette strategically overlooked a bus terminus and that perilous intersection beyond, which had periodically claimed so many lives.

Perhaps it was the thundering hooves of one hundred horses of the Queen's Horse Guards'? With a uniformed cavalry rider on one horse and running a second horse alongside by its reins, the sinuous pairings regularly galloped by my window. Two abreast they would surge forward on their regular, rain-or-shine, pre-dawn exercise through the deserted North London streets. Clattering past, they would continue to the north, audibly slowing up heart-straining Highgate West Hill. The staccato sounds would gradually fade away into utter silence. I always wondered if they watched for out-of-control cars coming down the other way.

Or was it Karl Marx again?

Out of long habit, I got out of bed, staggered in the dark to the window and pulled aside first the heavy streetlight-blocking curtain and then the diaphanous nylon lace curtain. In my sleep-groggy state I stared out at the surprisingly empty street quietly illuminated at regular intervals by blotchy yellow sodium light. I saw no finely trained Arab steeds, their coats glistening with sweat, streaming by my window. Nor did the image of a mangled automobile engulfed in flames painfully strike my nighttime eyes. So it had to be Karl.

The next morning, talking with my friends about the nights events, we decided to suss out the reason for our common rude awakenings. The local kids, including myself, William, Gennaro, Brian, Colin, Terry, Peter and whoever else was around, had gathered together outside St. Albans Villas. The Villas is a four-storied sand-coloured brick block of flats in which many of us lived. I could remember playing on the WWII bomb site of my future

home before the St. Pancras Borough Council built the new Villas in 1959.

Our expedition began by walking down St. Albans Road, a left on the short leafy block of Brookfield Park past Dr. Barber's surgery, and then a right onto Swains Lane, which was lined by majestic London Plane trees. This steep road stretched to the top of Highgate Hill, the highest point in London. The latticework BBC radio and TV transmission tower poked through the tall trees near the top of the hill, beyond our present destination.

Our first priority was to get safely by the creepily gothic, Holly Village on our right. Hastily we shuffled by because of its mysterious inhabitants and the unsettling presence lurking menacingly behind tall, thick hedges of prickly holly bush and rustic wooden fences. The sturdy hedge and fence gave us a modicum of courage as we occasionally stopped and peeked curiously through small gaps in the hedge. The tantalizing glimpses of the eerie and secluded Victorian cottages nestled within on their clipped green swards gave us the inspiration for plenty of fantastic ghostly tales.

We were, of course, also keeping a careful eye out for the dreaded Balmore Street Gang. Here we were possibly trespassing on the very edge of their territory. There were no real boundary demarcations for the gang's fiefdom; wherever they were at that time was their territory as they saw fit. Roaming in groups of ten to fifteen scruffy bullies, aged from about eight to sixteen, they were a long 'cherished' local tradition. I had been mostly fortunate during my many close encounters with them. Since I was both a fast runner and furious bicyclist, I could usually speed away from their motley on-foot group.

Most of my gang, and even our older brothers and sisters before us, had been treated to a hard lesson on territorial borders when we unknowingly, accidentally, or unavoidably

strayed in or near their Balmore Street turf. My friends and I were in fact all a load of unashamed cowards, so a chance meeting was the last thing we wanted in our present quest.

As I walked along with my mates, I ruminated about my worst encounter with the gang when I was ten, along this very stretch of Swains Lane.

I was biking up the road with Colin Hayward, when depressingly for us, about twelve members of the gang appeared from around the corner of Chester Road. They saw us and started shouting threateningly and shaking their fists in our direction. Breaking into a run, the gang raced towards us down the middle of the road. We looked at each other and we knew what we had to do. Survival meant flight. Turning, we pedaled furiously down the hill to what we hoped was safety. My legs were churning; primal adrenalin was coursing through my veins. I was looking over my shoulder at their frightening proximity when the world unexpectedly exploded. Suddenly I was flying. Cart-wheeling through the air I crashed down to the cambered tarmac, landing on my back, with my now-crippled bike next to me.

Dazed, I become even more so as I looked down the street and saw a small, swaddled baby surreally rolling down the center of the street. I became aware of loud, shrill, ululating screams and saw the baby's mother frantically running after her roly-polying child. As I lay spread-eagled with small bits of road gravel embedded in the angular parts of my body, I thought I'd better check on my imminent safety. Achingly, I turned my muzzy head uphill. All I saw was a badly dented empty pram, its wheels still spinning, laying on its side in the middle of the road. Lucky for us all, there were not many cars on

the roads of England in 1960.

Without looking, the mother had walked out into the street, from between some parked cars, and I had blindly hit the pram, side-on, at full speed. My bike and I had hurtled over the top of the carriage as the baby, shot like a catapult, rolled out of the upended, heavy pram.

Upon seeing this bizarre scene unfold, the Balmore Street Gang, ultimately cowards, stopped dead in their tracks. Realizing that they might be blamed for the accident, they ran away with their proverbial tails between their legs and watched the proceedings from around the corner of Chester Road. The mother retrieved her dizzy baby from down the street and shouted angrily at me as she up-righted the badly dented pram and placed her thankfully unhurt child, back inside. Slowly I got up and checked on the severity of my cuts, grazes and the many future bruises beginning to make themselves known. Limping home with Colin, half-carrying, half-rolling my now Dali-esque bike, I now dreaded my Mum's reaction to this day's improbable events.

My internal reminiscing over, we tumbled up Swains Lane, crossed the dreaded Chester Road T-junction, and peeked into the graveyard now beginning on our right. Poorly maintained obelisks were tilting at perilous Tower-of-Pisa angles. Monuments and angels had fallen haphazardly to the damp earth and were peering out through the overgrown vegetation of brambles and weeds. The old memories within were blissfully safe, forgotten now, behind the thousand-times painted wrought iron bars, and the smog-marred red fletton brick walls of the cemetery.

Turning right, through tall wrought iron gates, we entered Highgate Cemetery East. This entrance is across the road from the entrance to the much older, West cemetery with its high brick walls and a gothic folly of a gatehouse. For us, the West was the scarier part of the cemetery. Deteriorating family vaults and dark looming trees kept us well away. Tales of gruesome morning-after residue of animal sacrifice by black magic aficionados and Caribbean voodoo practitioners on tombstones were whispered amongst children and grown-ups. Sometimes the local paper even reported on these exotic occurrences as when a neighbour had gotten into his car one morning and found a freshly dug-up corpse in the passenger seat.

We boy-played our way down the curvy, well kempt path, kicking up the small yellow gravel which crunched under our feet. Irreverently, we passed by the elaborate stone gravesites of once-known dignitaries and artists and some still memorable ones as Charles Dickens' wife and children. The view on the final turn on the path told all. Even from this distance we could see the obviously truncated dark edifice. Yes, Karl Marx had indeed been the cause of our rude awakenings last night. He had suffered another mighty blow to his dignity. His head had been blown up again.

Why was Karl Marx, a German Jew, buried in this Christian cemetery in north London? We had learned at school that he had converted from Judaism to Christianity whilst still in Germany. Eventually kicked out of his country for his revolutionary teachings, he sought refuge in the relatively politically tolerant environs of England, where he lived from 1849-1883. Marx had lived in a seedy district of London near the British Museum, where many international progressives and revolutionaries such as Garibaldi and Engels,

had gravitated to study, ponder and regroup. He and many of his fellow exiles flourished in this freer political climate. Gaining support from fellow émigré's, they would write their great proletariat manifestos for their far away oppressed countries before returning to change their world. When Marx died he was interred in the nearby Highgate Cemetery.

Workers of the world were milling around the monument as we ran up to see the effects of the bomb. The fierce-looking, three-foot-diameter, hollow bronze bearded head of Marx once had sat proudly atop the violated block of marble. Now it was residing humbly on the marble base of his plinth, leaning decapitated, bruised and battered, against the side of the formidable eight foot tall, dark marble block. Marx's name, engraved in large *kapital* letters, was indeed still impressively bevel chiseled into the front side of the block's shiny surface. The marble at the top of the plinth was another story, a charred lumpy mess and a ring of jagged bronze was all that was left of his neck. The surface of the rudely separated head revealed the brighter dings of scraped patina amid tufts of still clinging, fluorescent green grass. These marks showed where various bits of his solemn visage had come into contact with gravestones, rocks and the surrounding lawn in its ignominious tumbling descent. Graveyard workers had carried the head back to unceremoniously rest against the side of his monument. The tableau reminded us of the archetypal headless ghost with its head tucked under one of its own arms.

The cold war was indeed 'hot' in my neighborhood. Many strange enemies, bedfellows, and allies had been created by the cold war between the communist Soviet Bloc and the

capitalists. Karl Marx, the original propagator of communist ideology and his grave were naturally one of the major iconic symbols of communism that were residing beyond red borders along with Trotsky's illustrious ice-pick in Mexico. The head was such a convenient target for any gratuitous 'anti-commie' sentiment. Defiling the head of a man who had changed the course of world history was just another blow in the continuing philosophical differences between East and West in the post-WWII Nuclear Age. His cenotaph, located in central London, was conveniently close enough for any budding bomb-maker. One had just to take the new number 214 Routemaster semi-solid, red double-decker bus to the terminus next to my home and walk from there. I suppose it was an inexpensive and convenient way to cock-a-snoot at a conflicting ideology. Nobody got hurt, the point was made, and the chap was dead anyway.

After our hushed inspection of the sooty remains, and after being shooed away repeatedly by the irritated labourers, we wandered through the graveyard, looking for unusual memorials and getting up to our harmless British schoolboy mischief. Scaring each other in the murky light and dark shadows was our endless play. With so many great hiding places to leap from and gnarly old trees to climb, we usually ended up panicking each other and would race pell-mell like a herd of wild-eyed buffalo to a safe sunny clearing. Exploring overgrown paths, ghoulish fascination made us compete to look for tombstones of the most extreme age or youth of those interred. We made exciting discoveries of whimsical funereal souvenirs of the wealthy dead, or of artistically designed gravestones with touching poetry covered over by ivy and a crust of moss and lichens. Even our naïve schoolboy eyes could appreciate the beautifully detailed three-dimensional stone monument of a man playing a grand piano, or the tombstones with the interred one's pet

dog head carved faithfully into the headstone.

The acid rain-stained praying angels on chipped pedestals serenely prayed for us and bade us fare-the-well as we departed. Straggling past old forgotten tombs and the carefully tended new gravesites festooned with fresh-cut flowers we left the cemetery. Our curiosity about the night's dramatic event and our excess energy had been duly satisfied.

Perhaps tomorrow we would be woken up by the horses.

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