1998

I'll Try it for a While

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Recommended Citation
Nanton, Philip, I'll Try it for a While, Kunapipi, 20(1), 1998.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss1/16

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I'll Try it for a While

Abstract
I don't think that I want to tell these events to the outside world more than once. In my head, of course, some of them recur in sudden flashes at the strangest times. But we had better not go into that! You must understand, though, for a long time I repressed their memory, especially the phone call. After all, these events happened some thirty years ago. The fragments have only recently come together so that I can now recount the experience.

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I don’t think that I want to tell these events to the outside world more than once. In my head, of course, some of them recur in sudden flashes at the strangest times. But we had better not go into that! You must understand, though, for a long time I repressed their memory, especially the phone call. After all, these events happened some thirty years ago. The fragments have only recently come together so that I can now recount the experience.

You could call the whole thing an every day story of privileged colonialism. With privilege came duty and, even for a child, a sense of duty can exact a high price. The nub of the entire process for me, however, was a single phone call. I had to live with its consequences minute by minute, day by day, until the event, that call, became nothing of importance. A long forgotten summons to speak.

The years before that fateful call are surrounded by a nostalgia that refuses to be shifted. It brings to mind ‘family’, ‘warmth’ and what I assumed was ‘permanence’. They were days of bright comic book pages turned by gods who were either amused or indifferent to my strivings.

My family lived in a town house at the south-western corner of a sloping field. The field had the grand name of Victoria Park. We were well off but from a poor tiny colony in the West Indies. At that time the island’s population could fit into Wembley Stadium, with room to spare. Our neighbours were either relatives, whose house was for me an extension of ours, or friends, who seemed to have lived for ever next door to us.

From one upstairs window of our house I could watch football, cycle races and cricket matches as our two seasons, dry and wet, came and went. Home life was cosy conventional. My Dad went off each day to run his store in the town. My Mum stayed at home to run the house. The household was the centre of my life. Many items in the house were known by their brand names. We did not use Worcestershire sauce but ‘Lea & Perrins’. Cod liver oil was ‘Seven Seas’. My Dad’s favourite whisky was ‘White Horse’ and its antithesis ‘Alka-seltzer’. All these items at meal times had their particular place on the dining room table. In an alcove under the stairs was kept my Mum’s sewing machine. It was, inevitably, ‘the Singer’.

Domestic labour at that time was cheap and plentiful. Our cook’s name was Prince, my nanny was called Thomas and the house-maid, Estelleta. Employees usually stayed loyal to our household for many years. School happened regularly but varied between two institutions. One was the
grandly named Kingstown Preparatory School, an overcrowded government school where we sang our times tables and recited unlikely poems like ‘The Burial of Sir John Moore After Corunna’ the many stanzas of which, for some reason, remain lodged in my memory. The other school I attended was a small ‘Dame School’. It was run by a large, black and quarrelsome spinster, Miss Peters. It was our duty each morning to convert a few rooms of her house into class rooms and in the afternoon to return the rooms to her home. This school was intended to instil in me the basics of the three R’s which, apparently, the larger school was incapable of doing to the satisfaction of my Dad and Mum. And so, Miss Peters kept a steady eye on some fifteen of us, as we parsed innumerable sentences, sweated through long-division and compound interest calculations, practised our cursive style in large copy-books and acquired a detailed knowledge of the King James version of the Bible. School and home were closely connected. I can remember, for example, to my great embarrassment, Estelleta, our maid, appearing at the little schoolhouse holding out my mid-morning snack which I had carelessly forgotten.

The years were divided by festivals and natural events. Two of the most important festivals for me were Christmas and Carnival. A special treat at Christmas was to be taken window shopping at night to see the range of new toys on display. This involved a visit to the three main streets in the town, Back, Middle and Bay. The cobbled stones of Middle Street twisted and buckled my feet in the surrounding gloom. Then a bright florescent light from a shop window made it bulge with clockwork toys, bales of doth and rows of household gadgets. The presence of these items was made more intense by the dim glow of the nearby street lights. This was an event we enjoyed as a family, like our annual beach holiday, with bright eyes and our mouths making a big wow.

Christmas had a smell all of its own. As a merchant, my Dad imported a few Christmas trees and one was always kept for us. So, that festival for me is firstly associated with the smell of dried pine. Mixed with this, was the strange scent which combined the plastic and metal of new toys torn from their wrapping before dawn on Christmas morning.

Before Lent, each year, I would thrill to the fear and excitement of ‘Jouve’ and the Shrove Tuesday parade. From that time I especially remember the dreaded ‘Monkey Man Band’. A known extrovert chained, tarred and masked himself for a day. His chains were held by a few followers from his band whose job was to restrain him. Occasionally, he would lunge at bystanders as he strutted and danced past our house to his small fife-and-drum band. Sometimes he would break ranks to chase a particular child before being restrained. Then he would rejoin the parade of brightly coloured carnival bands as they jigged and ping-ponged down the road to the steel-band music.

Between July and September hurricane warnings also broke up the year. One August I remember a severe storm was coming ominously close to our
island. The radio was constantly turned on in preparation for the next weather report. Windows were boarded up. Kerosene lamps and candles positioned. ‘Crix’ biscuits and tins of ‘Kraft’ processed cheese were stockpiled along with buckets of water.

As the storm drew even nearer, I remember seeing my Dad carry out a final act of preparation. As the light faded and lanterns were lit for the evening, in the eerie half-glow, he marched with a blanket to place it over what was probably the most innocuous item in the house, the telephone. Why the phone should merit this attention at such a time remains for me a mystery. Perhaps without the cover the lightning might have come dancing down the wires to escape into the house. Who knows. To a small boy it seemed significant at the time. The magic worked. The storm veered. We were saved.

But I digress. I don’t recollect very much about my first weeks in England and even less about the week before the fateful phone call came. I remember fighting back tears on the platform of London’s Victoria Station. That was the first time that I joined a small army of children dressed in regulation blue and grey. The clothes were heavy; for, a child from the tropics, I was not as yet accustomed to the weight of overcoats and those heavy Oxford shoes. There was probably only a lump in my throat as the train pulled out. Ignorance can protect for a while.

My first evening in the school I was offered a warm brown sludge to drink. I was told it was called ‘collation’.

There were long dormitories. The one I slept in had twenty-eight beds. There were insufficient blankets in winter and each night the sheets felt wet when I put my feet in between them. In a sort of mantra I used at first to count the thirteen beds on one side before coming to mine, the fourteenth, as I walked down the dormitory at night. Then, I would multiply by two.

The bathroom, with its line of washbasins and its slatted wooden floor, was a particular ordeal. It was not just being forced to stand around to wash in thin pyjamas in the unheated room. Sometimes there were towel fights in which the towels were rolled in a special way to make a type of tail. The ends were wetted and then they would be flicked at bare flesh. When they connected it made a sound like a cap-gun going off and stung quite fiercely.

One boy was assigned to show me the ropes. I’m told that I followed him around like a shadow for some time. I ate when he ate. Walked when he walked. Stood around when he stopped to talk to his friends. There was no romantic spirit of adventure. No fighting back. No ‘Tom Brown’s School Days’ with hitting the winning runs.

I have no recollection of weather changes or any other natural events of that time. There was mostly a cold, empty, aloneness.

I don’t recollect which lesson the phone call interrupted. I knew it was coming and it was only a matter of time. When it was over it seemed like a sharp blade had finally cut my world in two, causing change to spill over everything.
The boy who showed me the way to the school office left me at the door. It was ajar so I pushed it further but it only half-opened, allowing me to squeeze into the room, avoiding a protruding cupboard. Two mahogany desks filled the centre of the room. At one sat the school secretary. Her face was a very old crumpled white mask. She sat in front of a large upright typewriter. Near her elbow was the base of an ancient black telephone. The other desk was piled high with files, ink splattered Latin primers and dog-eared exercise books. From one wall a young Queen Elizabeth II looked over her dominions large and small.

The old woman held out the black telephone receiver and said: 'We don't usually allow calls to pupils. They cause too much disruption. But as you're new ...'

I put the receiver to my ear. The holes in the mouthpiece were encrusted with dried dust and spittle. The object smelled of cheap perfume. I felt sick; knowing, fearing and not wanting to know what would happen next.

One week ago, before I boarded the school train my Dad and Mum had said: 'Be brave. Just try it. We'll call to see how you like it. If you don't you can always return with us.'

'Hello' I said tentatively.

From far way a metallic voice said: 'So what do you want to do, son? We've still got your return ticket. The boat leaves day-after-tomorrow. You decide.'

My new woollen shorts itched uncomfortably. My bare knees were white with cold. My school tie felt like a stone lodged in my throat. The room turned watery. 'I ... I don't ... I want to ... I'll try it for a while' I stammered down the telephone to my father.

My confused and dependent state did not last long. A new order was already established. The wake-up call was at 7.10 each morning. Breakfast at 7.35, inspection of bed-making 8.05. Daily chapel 8.30. Then lessons till break time, more lessons, lunch, games, more lessons, tea, homework, a little free time, the dreaded bathroom and lights out. Military without the killing, until it was almost second nature. 'Almost', because with each fresh term's arrival, the platform at Victoria station would absorb my tears until the school train departed and the regimen, once again, imposed its mechanistic order.

Some of the other colonial children did not last the course. One boy, who, when told to write home to dear Mummy and Daddy, wrote instead to the family cat. He soon disappeared. Others simply called it a bad dream, shelved the uniforms and returned to the old order. Many more like me saw it through. Were we tougher or more docile? Who can tell? We certainly were changed.

I think that I can guess the unspoken question in your eyes. Why do I choose to recount all this now? What triggered these memories?

Some days ago my secretary took a telephone call from a Mr. Johnston asking me to ring back. He was calling from a number I failed to recognize. I
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returning his call. A special reunion was soon to take place, he said. Boys from the 60s were being traced by all sorts of ingenious methods. Hope I didn’t mind such a call out of the blue. Would I like to attend? If I enjoyed the event then I might like to join other regular reunions.

I was flattered. But I was also put on the spot. I’d never been back to the school. What could I say? With all these memories flooding back and with increasing self-consciousness as the words came out, I heard myself say; ‘I’ll try it, for a while’.

LETTER TO PHILIP NANTON

My dear son,

Thank you for your long letter which arrived yesterday. Unfortunately it took fifteen whole days to get here. Don’t write KINGSTOWN on the address. If you write KINGSTOWN they send it to JAMAICA. The stupid Post Office people sometimes think KINGSTOWN is a mistake for KINGSTON and send it there first.

In your letter you ask about what is happening in the island. It sounds as if you miss it a little bit. Well, don’t worry about that. NOTHING is happening here. The place is DEAD. A few people struggle to earn a living but not many want to work. So many are leaving to go abroad the island will soon be empty.

We can’t even get the things we need in the shops. Things like ‘Sanatogen’. ‘Wait till the next shipment comes in,’ says the chemist, Mr. Jack. ‘But that could be weeks,’ I tell him. ‘What to do but wash your feet, pray to God and go to bed’ the damn fool tells me. Sometimes the boats just pass us by altogether. Your mother and I see them steaming by at night; all lit up not stopping even for a by­your-leave. So you see, you are really better off over there.

Another thing you should also know is that education here has gone to the dogs. Forty or more to a class. No science laboratory in any schools. Mr Richards tells me that he can’t get cover for his teachers if one of them is sick. Then that means eighty to a class sometimes. A hell of a way to carry on. The politicians, those scamps and thieves, don’t care. They say that they are fighting for independence. Independence for a rock a little stone sticking out of the sea-water. Imagine that.

Son, there is something that worries your mother and me very much. What is all this communistic business that you are putting into your letter? Your older brother had some of that in his head a little while ago. He was reading some of those funny UK papers, I suppose that is where you get it from. Those people can be damn dangerous. We have a few of these over-educated types who have come back to the island. I hear them sometimes with all their talk of ‘surplus-value’, ‘contradiction’ and the rest. What surplus-value do we have on this two-by-four­rock? We barely have value. And they want to look for surplus. I wouldn’t worry about that again.

I sometimes wonder now whether we should have left you there. You don’t know how much we discussed over and over if to leave you in the UK. In the end we thought that the UK was the best place. But be careful of those strange ideas.

Did I tell you that old man Joseph has sent his two sons to the UK, and the Jeffries children are soon to leave. You might see them in London. The Monks boy is back in the island. They said he couldn’t take the cold. He also started writing odd letters back home. He is now in the rum shop every day. You see, there is nothing to do here. If you get cold at night ask that nice man who runs the school for more. blankets. Soon holidays will be coming round, so keep cheerful,

Your affected father.