

Tower Hamlets, East London, 1960

From the moment I began bashing away on Auntie Eileen's upright piano, aged seven, it was clear I was no miracle child. Mum thought I was a prodigy, but I had no idea what I was doing. It would be years before I knew Bach from Bowie. I was just hammering away, pounding the keys, giddy with the sound and rhythm. I'd hit a really tasty discord, stamp on the sustain pedal and let it hang there, like a fart. Then I'd take a deep breath and off I'd go again, hammering away until my fingers were raw.

Sometimes I'd sing along with the hammering—a weird, wobbly wail, swooping around like a theremin, searching for a tune. Dad said it sounded like the racket cats make in the middle of the night, when they're shagging. Mum would giggle, then tell him off. They'd yell at each other for a while and he'd skedaddle down the pub to listen to some “real music”—skiffle and trad jazz. Once, when Mum was at her Mother's Union meeting, he sneaked me in and I was blown away by the sheer stomping energy.

Eventually, Auntie Eileen got so fed up with the hammering and wailing she offered to give me lessons. Music was her passion. She was the organist at our local church and taught piano part time. It turned out I had a half decent voice, when I wasn't impersonating a theremin. She got me in the choir and I was soon singing solos.

I reduced Mum to tears on Christmas Eve, when I sang the first verse of 'Silent Night', a cappella. “I reckon our Rob's just as good as those choirboys on telly,” she told her sister. “Y'know, the midnight mass boys?”

Auntie Eileen frowned. “Well, yes, he sings like an angel, but comparing him to King's College choir? Hmm...” She tailed off into weird, tuneless humming (which sounded spookily

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like my weird, wobbly wailing). “Hmm—” The humming stopped dead. “Actually, you know what?” She gave us one of her looks. “Maybe you’re right, Dorothy.”

A few weeks later, she invited Mum and me round to her place and showed us a glossy brochure for St. Paul’s Cathedral School. “I think Rob should have a go at the audition.”

Mum reminded her we lived in a council flat in Tower Hamlets.

“Yes, I know Dorothy, but look what it says on the cover: ‘Ordinary boys doing extraordinary things.’ And here...” She pointed at a dog-eared page. “They have scholarships for boys from ‘deprived backgrounds’.”

Mum flicked through the brochure, open-mouthed. It was beyond posh—like somewhere the royals would send their kids. “Do you really think Rob has a chance?”

Aunty Eileen shrugged. “Maybe, with the right coaching.” She winked at me and grinned as I blushed.

Mum put the brochure in her bag. “I’ll show this to Ron.”

As soon as she mentioned Dad, I knew he’d scoff at the idea—especially when he saw the photos of the choirboys in their frilly collars. He was the sort of bloke who made snide comments about men in tights when ballet was on TV, or “fat women with ’orns” if it was opera. But Mum and her sister ganged up and battered him into submission.

The glossy brochure had seduced Mum. She imagined me on the telly, singing a solo at a royal wedding, meeting the queen. I deserved my chance and she deserved her fantasy. Aunty Eileen thought it could be the start of my career as a musician. Dad pooh-poohed that suggestion.

“No way! He’s gonna get a proper job. Plumber, maybe.”

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In the end he gave in, although, as always, he had to have the last word. “Anyway, I don’t know why we’re gettin’ so het up about it. He’ll never pass the exam, and even if he did, they’ll never let ’im into a poncey place like that.”

Aunty Eileen rang the school and they sent her an application form. She filled it in, posted it back, and a few weeks later we got a letter with a date for my audition.

She was a cunning old bird, Aunty Eileen. She did some research down the library and discovered this obscure 18th century composer, who’d been a choirboy at St Paul’s. He was famous in his day, and still occasionally performed. Aunty Eileen found a suite of Irish folksongs he’d arranged and she reckoned his setting of ‘The Galway Shawl’ would suit my voice. The choirmaster, a Mr Chapman, had written an article for a music magazine “eulogising” this composer, as my aunt put it. So he’d be bound to lap it up.

She had me practising that song so much I could sing it in my sleep. It wormed its way into my dreams and I was waking up humming it. By the time it came to the audition, I was bloody sick of that stupid tune. But it did the trick.

The aural test was just about OK—ish. I nearly peed myself, but I scraped through. Mr Chapman wasn’t impressed, but as soon as Aunty Eileen launched into the intro to ‘The Galway Shawl’, he looked up, big grin on his face. I sang it pretty well and by the second verse he was nodding along. At the end, he actually applauded. I was gobsmacked.

“An inspired choice, Jones,” he said, making a note on his clipboard.

Aunty Eileen winked at me.

“Frobisher has been sadly neglected. His Irish Suite is rarely heard these days, but in my

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humble opinion, it's a remarkable setting of some lovely melodies.”

Aunty Eileen smiled. “Absolutely. Robert loves this song, don't you, Rob?”

I nodded, blushed, and stared at the carpet.

“Well, it was refreshing to hear it sung so well.” Mr. Chapman smiled at me. “Thank you, Robert. We'll be in touch.”