

Appendix Two: Praise Song for the Day - 1.20.09

I don't usually do heroes. It's not my cup of tea to follow blindly. I normally stay reserved and circumspect, at the back of an arena. I'm all too ready to seek their feet of clay. So why did I go 3500 miles to follow a hero into Washington DC? This is what I am wondering at the airport before my plane left. Sometimes our actions and their consequences can seem disconnected. But they are like stitches through life's fabric, disappearing and re-appearing in turn. We can book a flight and months later get on the aeroplane. Between the stitches, I wondered if I'd made a mistake. I have an idealistic and a sceptical side to me. At the airport, the sceptic was winning. On the TV in the Departure Lounge, they played Obama's speech live as he left Philadelphia by train, following Lincoln's trail to Washington. People around me seem serious, even a little uncomfortable. Could it be that we have woken up to the myth? After all, who in the UK can't think of Tony Blair without a flinch?

The world also looks like an even darker place, between the optimistic November of Obama's Victory when I booked my ticket, and now. Gaza has burned again and the economy plummets. My own father's health has been bad. No-one can see the bottom. It isn't a time for frivolity. But is it a time for joy? There is, to use Obama's own word, the audacity of it all...

I fly west, into an eternal sunset, arriving in the early evening. I feel my scepticism melting a little as I cross the border at Dulles airport. I came through here before, two years ago. There is a noticeably different atmosphere now. Last time I felt thoroughly checked out. This time, I feel checked out and welcomed. Is this the Obama factor? I find my rental car and drive down crazy roads towards the Capital. American highways unnerve me. People can overtake you on both sides, and it seems to me, even above and below. There is a profusion of road signs, none of which make much sense. It suggests that offering too much information can reduce one's sense of choice. I drive grimly towards anything that says 'East' on it. I find my friends' house and even now I have no idea how I did it. Bob and Gail live in Alexandria, Virginia, about 10 miles outside of the Capital, across the Potomac River. They are intelligent, left-leaning, middle class professionals. They live in the small, Democratic enclave of Hollin Hills, in a modern style house. They leave their front door unlocked and their only security device is a rusty sign in the window that reads 'beware of the dog'. They have no dog. These are Americans who do understand irony.

The next day is Sunday, D-Day minus 2, and I meet my friend Rob on 7th Street. Rob is the prime mover of a group call '7 Go West' ('7GW'), a group of friends, mostly civil servants in various UK Government Departments, inspired enough by Obama to make the trip. Sometimes they call themselves 7GW '+' and I am the '+'. Most of them come from a background in diversity, both personally and professionally and they are people for whom these things matter. They have linked up with Doreen Lawrence, mother of Stephen, for whom they are working to organise a ticket into the inner enclave for the event itself on Tuesday. Rumours abound about where these can be found. We meet in a giant, Obama-store, selling all sorts of stuff in homage of The Man. T-Shirts, bags, badges (or 'buttons' as they call them here). I even find condoms, with 'change is coming' on the packet. The place is vast and heaving. There is a sort of frenzy and again, I feel my balance tip towards the idealism. For black people like Rob, there is a hugely significant shift going on that Obama doesn't just symbolise – he makes. It is summed up in the phrase on one of the T-Shirts which Rob particularly admires: 'Obama: the end of an error'. Whatever Obama says or does now, it is who he is, and what he is that has already done so much. I should know that, doing a PhD in the embodiment of masculinity. I know that my body says so much, before I even open my mouth. Obama has already done so much and this is what the people are picking up

on here. And yes, people everywhere are making good money out of his face. In a recession, why not? God bless America.

As Rob and I queue together to pay for our chosen tat (said affectionately), my scepticism reasserts itself. In Rob's hands I notice a couple of medals he holds with a picture of Obama's face on them. At least, it is supposed to be Obama's face but I am not so sure, and neither I suspect was the guy in China who made them.

- Me: Honestly! Put those back. He looks like more like the Uncle Ben's rice guy
- Rob: That's the trouble with you white folks: you all look alike to us too!

We laugh and so does everyone around us. This is the miracle of Obama. Something has shattered. It is as if it isn't colour that has divided us; it is a more transparent substance, like a pane of glass, which has prevented us from really touching one another. People from different backgrounds have lived too long in an uneasy, polite truce, not really talking about *the thing*, the issue of race in all of its complexity. Now perhaps Obama is helping us touch, and talk, laugh, even argue and work it all out. This is necessary, because there is some working out to be done. Everyone, everywhere in Washington is talking about race. Not in a whinging way, but in a joyful, celebratory, challenging, truly *engaged* way. It is so intoxicating and such a relief. Perhaps people are also listening to each other. Rob puts the medals back on the shelf.

There is a 'We are One' concert by the Lincoln Memorial, but we can't really get near it and anyway, we are content to sit in a really good bar with a TV, eat some great American food and talk about Obama. I meet Ben, an African American who works at the Pentagon. 'All I have ever done is serve my country, without question. Now I hope I can be prouder of what it does.' We are so sceptical of patriotism in the UK. Here, it is more of a given, and I'm beginning to wonder if that doesn't make electing Obama all the more remarkable. Perhaps a black man can be a true American Patriot, in a way that challenges us: can we make the parallel claim at home?

Afterwards, Rob and I go for a walk along Pennsylvania Avenue, the route of the presidential parade where the buzz and excitement is intense. People are thronging back from the concert on the site where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made his famous speech, and tomorrow is the 19th January, the anniversary of his birthday and a national holiday. No-one can ignore the significance of this, when history conspires with change so perfectly. It is MLK's dream we are now living. Rob shows me a videoed interview he conducted as part of a vox pop of the inauguration that 7GW are collecting. It shows a black woman, talking about how she was there at MLK's 'I have a Dream' speech, all those years ago. In fact, she says, MLK was losing the crowd and then someone, standing near her shouted out: 'Martin, tell us about your dream!' And he did.

We walk against the good natured tide of people flowing away from the Concert. Rob asks me if I'll help interview someone and I agree. 'We could do with some white people', says Rob and we pick out someone. He turns out to be from Florida, he is 'so pleased he can be proud of America again', (a recurring theme) and he is gay. Rob and I are in a fervour as we wander; of course Obama's arrival isn't just about black people, it's about everyone and anyone who symbolise difference. I read in the Washington Post (19/1/09): 'It's the beauty of Barack Obama', says black senator Ricky Hendon (D), who wrote the book, *Black enough, White Enough, the Barack Obama Dilemma*. 'He's a good compromise person, probably because of his heritage'. Rob says: 'It is precisely because of his mixed race heritage that Obama is so special.' Obama called himself a mutt, a mongrel and this is a celebration of mongrels. Ultimately, we are all 'compromise people', a grand mixture. I find this helpful. Too

often, I can slip into 'being Jewish' as if that is all I am, rather than just one important part of who I am. After all, do I look Jewish?

It isn't all peace, love and understanding. We are reminded from time to time that this is a gargantuan crowd and such a crowd can become a mob. Outside the White House there is a crush of people. Someone stands on the fence to get a photo. A Policeman bellows: 'Get down, you idiot!' The mood darkens immediately. There is a pervading menace here if you want to see it. The 'first family-elect' smiles at us behind bullet proof glass. Apparently the Security Services ordered many tons of the stuff when Obama was elected. Siren wails and the beating of helicopter blades are constant. You do get the impression from time to time that a vast (mostly white) cohort of grey-suited men will heave a huge sigh of relief when this mutt crowd buggers off and leaves them to their military industrial complex in peace.

The next day is MLK's birthday and I wander along the Mall, the big grassy open space that runs about 2 miles between the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol. This is where we would all be standing tomorrow. The authorities have banned camping overnight so people can't claim their territory yet, but you get the sense that most people, like myself, were checking out the angles. Dotted along the Mall are 6 or 7 enormous TV screens, dubbed 'Jumbotron', and people will mostly cluster around these. They were playing the 'We are One' Concert from the day before on a continuous loop. It is sunny and snowing intermittently. I walk passed the Washington Monument, the great needle in the Mall's centre, where a Revolutionary Communist Party speaker bellows about 'hypocrisy' to a tolerant, disengaged crowd. The ground is strewn with rock-concert detritus, mostly the remains of the 'must have' article of the crowds in these conditions: beside all the Obama-tat there was a profusion of 'chemical handwarmers', which look like disused tea-bags and work by releasing a menthol-like chemical to give frozen digits a little respite. It is cold, and getting colder. A Kenyan a cappella music group sings enchantingly for a small crowd of us. They are superb; one of my highlights. I recorded them if you want a look.

I walk past the World War Two Memorial which in its grand overstatement, seems to lack something, and the Vietnam Memorial, which in its understatement, says everything. It is a black granite-lined slit trench, carved with all the names of the US Service people who died. I have seen it before, but it is still achingly poignant. I realise I am deep in thought because Alistair, the 'other white guy in 7GW', as Rob calls him, leaps out at me from behind a tree and for a moment I think I am being mugged. But I am with friends again, as if by accident. It can only happen like that in a vast crowd. There are negotiations about where to next, some people go off in search of the fabled tickets and I go with Rob, Alistair and a young, fiercely bright and funny protégé of Rob's called Nathan, towards Arlington, not for the famed Cemetery but on a different pilgrimage. We head towards the metro stop that will take us to another kind of mall, where we are to do what one must do when in America. We go shopping.

That evening there is a buzz growing in intensity. All sorts of rumours are afoot: People won't be allowed to take in any bags at all, the metro will sieze up, security will be so tight that people won't get in, no-one will turn up because of the cold, the cellphone system will collapse...The latter is the only rumour that comes true. I plan my route. I aim to take the blue line metro to Arlington and walk over the only open bridge passed the Lincoln Memorial and onto the Mall. Bob, Gail and I share a bottle of champagne and talk for hours about all things related to Obama, America and Britain. They are very fond of Britain and Gail is a recognised expert on Tudor history. They also say how they, once more, feel they can be proud to be American. Gail has kindly organised a lift for me to the Metro, with Laney and David. David is the advisor to Ted Kennedy on Healthcare reform. I wish I had had more time to talk with him. But in the

car, all we talk about in the darkness is how cold it is and what routes we can take in. The Metro stop is at the end of the yellow line, so we are lucky as this gives us a better chance of getting on. It is 6am and it is already packed. We squeeze in but are separated and I never see David again. I hear later from Gail that he couldn't get into his office in the State Department where he would watch the Parade, because the Secret Service isn't there to man the entrances to the building. They are all too busy watching out for Obama. David heads back home instead to watch it all on TV.

I am packed in tight in a metro car and everyone is talking. The question is all about where we have come from. Everyone is covered in Obama-tat. I am wearing a gift from Gail: a big grey Obama T-shirt on which is printed the date 1.20.09 below the man's face. 7GW have all decided to have this date tattooed on various parts of their anatomy, before they return to the UK. I demur and Rob, rightly, calls me a chicken. 7GW are coming in from where they are staying on the other side of Washington and my contact with them becomes increasingly intermittent. In the metro car, I win the contest for the furthest travelled. People are 'surprised' and 'honoured' that I have come all this way. It occurs to me that my plan to change Metro lines for Arlington is doomed. I cannot move. It is time to follow the crush, letting it take me where it will. It is not unlike the worst kind of journey in the London rush-hour, only much, much better-tempered.

The crowd surges forward with me at its heart, onto the platform at L'Enfant Plaza, one of the stations nearest the Mall. The throng is immense but moving slowly upwards. As one, we make our way towards the Mall where hundreds of thousands are gathered already. The 7th Street entrance, which marks the boundary between the ticket-holding crowds and the free-loading masses of which I am one, is already shut and we are forced westwards to 14th Street. It turns out that this isn't that far and I am suddenly spewed onto the Mall, about halfway between the Capitol and the Washington Monument, which puts me just inside the first third or so nearest the Capitol. I am about 3 Jumbotrons back. I find a slightly raised patch of ground that was once grass, but is now part of a dusty field. It is 7.30 am. The inauguration process starts at 11.30am. I stand on my patch for the coldest four hours of my 44 years.

Let me say something about the cold. I only do this because it is hard for someone who has not stood in one place for an age in sub zero temperatures to imagine what it is like. I am well dressed for it. I have on thermals like my grandfather used to wear, several thick layers on top of this, all beneath my voluminous Obama T-shirt. On top I wear my big wool-lined leather flying jacket, scarf and hat. But this is simply not enough. It might not have been enough had I been doing press-ups. I have food in my pockets but I can't taste it. It becomes merely survival rations. I try not to think about needing to pee. In fact it helps that my thoughts have slowed to a crawl. The amiable chat around me when we first arrive quietens to a murmur. Occasionally someone says. 'God' (or more colourful language) – 'It's cold!' You know that scene in Titanic where Kate and Leonardo are in the water together and all the voices start to go quiet? It was like that. Only colder.

But through gritted, chattering teeth, I learn that I am standing next to an African-American couple who have come in from Florida. They also say that at last they can be proud to be American again. (Heard that before?) They tell me they are thrilled to be here, even if they were wearing shorts and t-shirts in the shade the day before. During the course of the long cold-soak, he says, to no-one in particular. 'I just can't believe it, it has hit me again. There's a black man in the White House.' Americans really do talk like this a lot and I have to say, it may sound corny to us reserved, cynical Brits, but actually we could do with a little bit more of this unbridled optimism. I am really moved by it. Later I make Bob and Gail laugh when I say 'the thing is; you

can tell everything about Britain from the fact that we use the word 'quite' as a superlative.'

Behind me are four young Jewish students from George Washington University law school. One of them is a wit. Later when Bush appears on the podium, he shouts out 'Four more years!' There are two young, keen photographers from Ireland. It has dawned on my through my ever slowing synapses that this isn't really just about Obama. It may sound 'American' to say it, but it is about all of us. Ich bin ein Amerikaner. The phone system is down and although I manage to raise Rob once, I must be content with the fact that he and the rest of 7GW are here somewhere, but I never did actually find them. It later turns out that they were within a hundred yards of me the whole time.

The time passes in a sort of dream, and we are slowly defrosted by signs of life on the Jumbotrons. Dignitaries are arriving. Like most events of this type and scale, there is a theatricality to the increasing fame of the faces on the screen. The great build up is well done. The crowd responds more and more enthusiastically as various faces appear, many of whose identity I have to ask my new friends to explain to me. They even show the guy who successfully ditched the airbus on the Hudson River in New York the week before, who had a special invite with his family to the ceremony. The crowd go wild. It is a time for heroes. Perhaps it's just that we finally understand how cold that water was.

Ted Kennedy got a similarly enthusiastic response. When he was taken ill at lunch, people around me saw it very symbolically, like a passing on of a baton. Only George W. Bush draws a 'boo' out of the masses, but even that has a kind of pantomime geniality to it. No-one cares anymore. Today he is, quite literally, history. Later, as the helicopter carrying him and Laura to Andrews Airbase passes over our heads, people wave a gleeful goodbye.

Then the Man appears. There is a sort of booming thunder that sweeps up the Mall, over us and all the way to the Capitol steps. It is an amazing noise. Startled, I even look up for an aeroplane. I can see fighter jets circling high above us, but this noise came from beneath and within us. It was unbelievably loud and the only way to stop one's ears from exploding was to shout along.

Most of the next bit I assume you saw on the TV. It really was quite different there though; colder of course, but more than that. Apparently, when the first men on the moon, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, got back to Earth and heard about all of the fuss that had gone on across the world about their trip, Buzz turned to Neil and said: 'You know, I think we missed the whole thing.' Yesterday, when I got back I watched the BBC's coverage of the inauguration on I-player and had the same feeling. Who was there? I spoke to others afterwards, who had tickets, but even they, like me, watched most of it on the Jumbotron. What day did we experience? And who was really there, or not? We all were there; we all became the eyes that saw ourselves.

In fact, the whole thing goes very fast once the ceremony begins. Only later, having thawed out in a bath at Bob and Gails' that I actually start to remember what I saw. It's funny what catches you. The thing that did it for me was the poem after Obama had spoken, by Elizabeth Alexander. Of course I more than welled up several times during Obama's address, but what breaks me open is one simple line in *Praise song for the Day*. It was, 'Say it plain, that many have died for this day.'

Afterwards, having said our goodbyes, I wander about the Mall, realising that all the exits are blocked and no-one is going anywhere fast. Once more I submit myself to the

crowd, and find myself going along 14th Street which leads onto the highway bridges towards the Pentagon and Alexandria, right past the Jefferson Memorial. Perfect. They are closed to traffic and it is great to be part of a huge mob of people walking along the six-lane expanse of road, legally trespassing a place you would normally fear to tread, in the sunshine. It is a strangely post-apocalyptic scene; an anti-disaster movie.

Movement makes us all warmer and we talk some more. The man next to me, wearing a boiler suit, is unemployed, but he doesn't see Obama as the answer. 'He talked about responsibility; I don't think it's up to him; I think it's up to me, but I hope he can help.' The woman on the other side works for a software company. 'Four years ago, my friend phoned me and told me to turn on the TV. Obama was speaking. She said that he would be the next President. So when it happened, I had to come. Yesterday though, it was really cold and I nearly didn't come, but my friends insisted. They said I had made the trip for them. They said Obama speaks to us all and you've got to hear it.' Both of them are young and both are white. They make me think about all the people I am here for too. I think of my son and daughter and hope.

We walk about four miles along this long, curving highway, back across the frozen Potomac River and into Crystal City, which is a rather dull place but it had two truly great things in it: a metro stop and a Starbucks.

That evening I go to a gentle inaugural party in Hollin Hills with Bob and Gail. I chat to a man who originally came from Nebraska. He is eldest of three sons and his father had seen him as the one to take over the family farm. He tells me: 'He was devastated when I became an accountant.' It's funny how life turns out.

Early next morning, my journey to the airport is pretty nightmarish, travelling ten miles in the wrong direction on a crowded highway when you've a plane to catch makes you quite panicky. (I'm using the British superlative there). Obama could do something about the road signs, although somehow I don't think it'll be high up on his list. But I made my flight in good time. It may have been fatigue, the scary highway moments or the sappy movie, but I find myself moved again on the plane. Or maybe having read the Washington Post and The Times and experiencing that Buzz Aldrin feeling, I am able to take in the full global sweep of what I witnessed. It may be just an over-welling of hope that I still feel. Obama called it the 'audacity of hope': something we feel not in spite of, but because of the darkness we feel surrounded by.

Don't get me wrong: I don't feel like I've lost all of my great British sense of perspective. No-one understands the ridiculous better than we do and it is still refreshing to see the funny side. The moment when the honour guard performed the ceremonial 'shutting of the helicopter door' for George and Laura tickled me greatly.

I cannot help but be touched by it all, though, and greatly uplifted. A small moment sums it up for me. On the Metro, on my way back from the Mall, tired and thawing, I caught the eye of an old African-American man. It could have been one of those awkward, pane-of-glass-moments, but instead of quickly looking away, he and I held our gaze for quite a while and smiled. It meant a lot. Obama said it himself: the cynics have failed to understand that the ground has shifted beneath them. My cynicism shudders backwards. My optimist bathes in some light.