

The Real And Doubtful Virtues Of Silence

The Kellys upstairs are the noisiest people I have ever known. Except perhaps for Rosie Flew who by eight in the morning has her radio switched on full blast to the cacophonous caterwauling of rock or pop or the raucous inane pattern of an inane announcer. The difference is that the Kellys make their noise at night. He is, the neighbours say, a fitter and turner — whatever that is — and she a ticket-seller at the Regent. I suppose the neighbours are right. Why should people lie? But I do wish that Mrs. Kelly would at least bring me a ticket for a matinee. Just once. Or twice. Probably, though, she scarcely thinks about me even though I live in the flat directly below hers. But, to her credit, she did ask me once how my “poor dad” was when he was laid up in bed with pneumonia. In any case, the point is that the Kellys only *meet* at night. He, Harold — Harry — Kelly departs for work at half past six each morning, holding a paper bag with flat sandwiches in one hand and a rolled-up plastic raincoat in the other — curiously, even in summer (but in these parts, that’s not really stupid) — while she, Mavis, doesn’t leave till ten; and in the evenings, he returns at five, or at the latest six, both his hands this time carrying a large parcel which jingles and tinkles and chimes as he goes up the stairs — he is wearing his raincoat which is open and flaps around his knees (what else can he do with it?) — while she doesn’t come back till nine. By then, Harry has had his few and his voice which, when sober, is as clear as — let’s say — a cricket on a summer’s night, has taken on a rougher edge as if, if it were physical it could best be described as a grindstone — gravelly, creaking, abrasive. Or perhaps like emery. Anyway, it’s obvious what I mean. Perhaps, when Mavis comes home, they talk quietly for a while — I don’t know, of course, because quiet can’t be heard — but sure enough after a half hour the first stridulous refrain somersaults out of the Kelly’s windows or somehow bores metallicity through the walls, the floors, our ceilings and punches sieve-like holes in every last corner of protective space. And that refrain, when it comes and as I sit behind my homework, — I am hopelessly fidgety and restless until it comes — is ever the same. It’s like

hearing the same play over and over again. Or the umpteenth rehearsal.

"Yer' never 'ome when I want ya'!"

Her voice is not so much shrill as burring. There is much clinking of glass and sometimes I wonder whether she too has her share of the froth he brings home.

"And whatcha' want me for anyway?"

"Yer' a woman, ain't ya?"

"And a good woman to ya, don'tcha' forget it. I make yer' sandwiches, leave yer' dinner for ya, keep yer' house so's ya' won't have to lift a finger more than ya' have to. . ."

"The sandwiches. Blimey. They're soggy by the time I eat 'em. And as for yer' dinner — if I wanna eat charcoal, I can get it cheaper at the chemist's. Gawd. . ."

"And when did ya' last take the rubbish out?"

"'ave a heart. Me back. I didn' go to that chiropractor quack for six months to spoil 'is work over a can of trash. . ."

"An' when didya' last take me out? — Think, 'arry, when did ya' last say, 'Mavis, let's you an' me go to a show together or a dance or even for a walk like we used ta' do'?"

"On me God-blessed soul, ya' making' me cry, Mavis. Ya' wanna start a flood? I ain't got no Ark to save us, ya' know."

"Me start a flood?! With the amount of grog ya' put away an' the torrents ya' piss, ya' could drown all them people in China! And with a bit more, in India as well."

"You does it with yer' gob every day. . ."

"An' if ya' didn' booze yer' money away, I wouldn' 'ave ta work to pay for the rent, the gas, the 'lectricity, the food ya' eat, and I could be 'ome when ya' wanted me. . ."

"Year, go on. Blame me drinkin' . . ."

"An' when did ya' last take me out? — Think, 'arry, when did ya' last say, 'Mavis, let's you an' me go to a show together or a dance or even for a walk like we used ta' do'?"

"Yer, go on. Blame me drinkin' . . ."

"An' when *I'm* ready, yer' so damn' stoned and shrivelled . . . Ya' think yer' fun ta be with?"

At this point, indignation is honed to sharpness, though Harry's voice, in scraping against every wall and surface within range, becomes a rugged field of abrasions. Once, when the Kellys first moved in, the neighbours used to crack open their windows, shout desperately into the darkness "Let's have some peace for God's sake!" and grind and

clatter their windows shut again. But now they remain unseen and silent. I'll bet anything, though, they're listening. . . Like me. . .

"Shrivelled?! I'll kill ya' if ya' say that again. I'm as good as any man ya' ever 'ad."

"Ha! Pump, pump, fizzle!"

"And what about you? Yer' just a soggy rag!"

"Pisspot. . ."

"I'm warning' ya'. . ."

Back and forth; the night is crammed to bursting with their verbal ejaculations. Strident, sibilant, shrill, cracked, terrible. The bottles and the glasses jangle; sometimes, something — a bottle, a boot, an ashtray, what? — falls, adding a touch of counterpoint and bass to their mounting nocturnal descant. The air itself pulsates with reeling, tempestuous, convulsive echoes of sound. I love it. I find the turmoil warm and comforting and quaintly serene. I delight in the certainty of it, in its predictability, its inevitability. Buoyed up on the clangorous foaming waves of their clamour, I find immense calm, and the easiest thing in the world is then to drift, content and amused and tranquil off to sleep. Indeed, once they went away for a long weekend, to Seaford I think, for three nights. I tossed and turned, desperately counted the quarter-hours that passed, looked repeatedly and hopefully up at the Kelly's windows and only fell asleep at last when total exhaustion overtook my brain — only to be jolted to stark trembling sweating terror, unslept, by the piercing primitive cacophony of Rosie Flew's radio. I was so glad when the Kellys returned. So glad that I stayed up on purpose and wrote down every insult, every threat, every curse on three whole sheets of foolscap torn out of my geography pad.

The same story every night. But nightly more virulent. Harry must spend his day at fitting and turning thinking up new insults, while Mavis, I guess, having nothing better to do than to read Cinema News between patrons, probably burrows into her very soul to disinter fresh taunts. An archaeologist rooting about the depths of history for artefacts could not be as enterprising. Last week, she told Harry, her own Harry, to hose the garden. But without a hose. All he had to do was go on drinking, undo his zip and just stand there. The next night she said that if an ant found its way up his leg and took one bite — it didn't need to be a

big bite neither — there'd be nothing left up there. Mavis is not exactly what one would call well-bred.

Tonight, of course, they're at it again.

They have reached the stage where Mavis says "Pump, pump, fizzle!"

But tonight, the script changes — earlier than usual.

"I'll pump, pump, fizzle you!" Harry howls.

There is a squeaky squeal. "Oooh!" That's Mavis. Is it delight or surprise or expectation? I don't know. There follows a scraping of feet, a floppy pattering, a scratching of chairs, of a table, of goodness knows what else. One would think that they are chasing one another, or at least, one is chasing, the other escaping.

"I'll show ya'! Pump, fizzle. Pump, fizzle."

This time, a bottle clatters to the floor. I know it's a bottle. I hear it crash and crack and glass tinkles ringingly on their worn linoleum.

"Hey, what's the hurry? Has the bee stung the fly tonight?"

"Shut yer' trap! Just once!"

"Ooh, the hare's on heat!"

"Please! Mavis!"

A creaking laugh. Mavis. Mavis with one, two, three too many? "Wipe yer' nose, 'arry. Yer' drippin' snot and yer'll dry yerself out b'fore ya' get ta' me."

"I warned ya'. I'll kill ya' so 'elp me God!"

"Yer' drunk. A sozzled befuddled crapulous plastered inebriated pisspot." (It seems she's just swallowed a dictionary whole).

"I want ya'!"

"Ooh, yer' rising. How can ya' raise yerself when ya' couldn't even raise a flag?! An' suddenly ya' want me."

"Yer' me wife."

"Yeah, I forgot. But even a wife a real man treats with respect. Worships her feet. Like she was a goddess like . . . I seen it. Cleopatra, Juliet, Helen of Troy. I seen it in the pitchers. . ."

"Ya' seen too much fancy stuff. . ."

"Fancy stuff?! Leslie 'oward. 'Oh, Juliet, wherefore art thou?' and Richard . . . 'im . . . Burton. Ah, man. Real muscle and blood and legs. Calves, thighs . . . Ya' can feel the sap that creeps, spurts, flows between 'em. Yeah, 'arry. Yer' a shadow 'gainst 'em. I ain't no Liz Taylor, but gawd . . . A

woman 'as a right to somethin' better'n a dipso. . ."

"I warned ya' . . ."

More pattering, scraping, scratching. And clattering, a squeal, a slam.

And then another squeal, almost a scream. A note of alarm.

"Whatcha' get that for? Whendcha' get it? Don' be a fool. Put it down!"

"I warned ya', Mavis!"

"Yer' bein' melodramatic. Like in the pitchers. Yer' drunk. 'ow can ya' shoot straight when yer' piss goes crooked and when ya' couldn't spit a toad straight in the eye?!"

"Shut up, Mavis!"

Somewhere nearby a window is shunted open with a screech and a crash. Then another. I look through the pane of my window. There are heads protruding over window sills, necks craned towards the Kellys'. Something is happening that is different from the normal. There is a titter of imminent explosion, of crisis, climax that begins to paralyse.

"Any idea what's goin' on?" says Jim Saunders straining at his hair.

"Wish I did, mate," says Albert Crimmins.

"We're in for a show," says someone else, I don't know who.

A peculiar throbbing hum pervades the building, and an excited mounting buzz as window after window is thrown open to the audible but invisible scene. Bill Bridges who lives directly opposite us has even come outside. He fidgets as he gazes up at the Kelly's flat. He is a concrete hulk of curiosity, bewilderment, anxiety. He bites his lips and shakes his head.

"Make me!" we hear. Mavis, her voice the screech of a crow.

"I'm yer' 'usband. The man ya' married. 'arry Kelly. 'arry Kelly, not yer' Leslie 'oward or yer' Richard Burton but 'arry, 'arry, 'arry with blood in 'is veins, in sickness an' in 'ealth, remember, till death us do part. . ."

"I married a man, 'arry, not jelly, a tower of flesh an' muscle an' strong black 'air, not a . . . a . . . a . . . 'arry!"

"Mavis!"

A thunderclap in the flat above. Powerful, echoing, sending the very guts to the throat. I'm not sure but I might want to vomit. I know that my ears ring and I have gone all sweaty and white. And it doesn't help to see Bill Bridges dart

around like a chook without its head, running towards the stairs, then scampering away, crying, "Oh, my God, oh heavens, oh my God."

"He's done 'er in!," someone says.

"Na', he wouldn't be so dense."

"Bert's right. She's copped it!"

"Hell!"

The buzz swells into a furore. Voices, a tumult, babble, pandemonium, panic. Rosie Flew sticks her head out of the window. Her father Wal pulls her roughly back inside. At the other window, Violet Flew is howling, goodness knows what. There is a quarter-moon above, but if anyone else notices it but me, I'm not sure. For the rest, there is a horrible darkness about the night and I expect — is it demons? — to leap with dripping fangs out of every shadow.

And then we hear it. At first indistinct, muffled, hoarse. But it becomes unmistakable. Something eerie, grotesque, vulgar. A whine into the night. A monstrous howling, a baying as though a pack of dingoes — or what I imagine to be dingoes — inhabit the flat upstairs. All the neighbours are paralysed. Move a finger and the universe will snap. Even my breath seems to have stopped. Only the sky is alive with that outlandish inhuman baying.

And then follows the second jolt. Bill Bridges jumps a foot. I jump two. Another thunderbolt, just as stark and as brutal as the first. And then a softer though no less ghastly whimpering that convulses, fades and finally stops.

It seems that the very wind had brought them. Sirens. Flashing lights blue and amber. Police, ambulance-men, a doctor, two photographers — one from the police, another from the press. All long-faced, hurrying, resolutely efficient. Each locked into his known understood slot. A hammering on a window, a coarse vocal appeal to open up, a key scraping unsuccessfully in a lock, a thwacking of a shoulder against the door, a searing cracking of wood, a splintering of shattered glass. And then for a while, quiet — only muted voices, murmurings, the shuffle of feet, the occasional flash of a photographer's bulb, the periodic call to a sergeant or an ambulance man.

What is going on up there?

Everyone is embarrassed to be leaning out over their sill, to seem so inquisitive, to be prying so avidly into another's misfortunes. But go tell them to withdraw, to step back, close

their windows and return to their stale humdrum cocoons nourished by the make-believe dreams of television when right before their noses is being enacted the very stuff of life that makes the flesh really creep and the spine quiver and the eyes smart with the devouring throb of sheer curiosity. They are punishing themselves with the agony of waiting for a resolution — as I am waiting — but, oh, how exquisite the pain, the very soul enraptured on the turning rack. Even Bill Bridges, frantically flitting from window to window, puffing with mad fury at a cigarette, is enjoying it now. He is important. He tells everyone his opinion — a different opinion to each so that all his opinions remain open and he can say at least to someone ‘See just as I said’ — and, dumb, or shaking their heads, or nodding, they listen to him, waiting, their swift eyes darting repeatedly from his gushing face towards the upstairs windows, the steps and the policemen and detectives who come and go.

Then a black van draws up before the flats. Two men in silver-buttoned uniforms and grey peaked caps step out and, one of them carrying a concertinaed stretcher, march in practised unison up the dull steps to the Kellys. Shortly after, they come down again, the stretcher opened out, a long hump down its middle, covered with a black tarpaulin. And after them, two ambulance orderlies carrying another stretcher, followed by the trail of policemen and photographers. There is an accompanying pounding down the stairs and a clatter and scraping, and also a succession of muted hard-lipped instructions given by the doctor who sidles beside the stretcher holding high a flask that shines with moonlight.

And from the stretcher, covered with a white blanket, there arises that inhuman whine, and a wheeze, and every now and then a convulsion, a sob and an outburst that I can just make out.

“Why’d you let me do it, Mavis? . . . I loved ya’, I did . . . an’ I was ready to join ya’ up there, but I missed. . . Me heart was in the wrong place or somethin’ . . . Wait for me in ‘eaven and I promise ya’ I’ll never booze no more an’ I’ll take ya’ to a show, just you an’ me and we’ll go dancin’ . . . like we used ter’ . . .”

Harry’s voice drifts away, is lost in the scuffling of feet, the babble of other voices and the coursing of the wind down the path. He is shunted by the orderlies and the doctor into the back of the ambulance and the doors are shut. And then the

ambulance sirens away, its amber light flashing; the police cars screech in a turn; the black van has already taken its leave; and the photographers share a joke and also go on their way. For a time, Jim Saunders, Albert Crimmins, Wal Flew and Bill Bridges lay bets on whether Harry will live or not, Violet Flew with Rosie beside her screams "Shame on youse", and, one by one, the windows are shut and fastened noisily, Bill Bridges goes back indoors, the neighbours return to what must seem now the dull depressing uneventful catacombs of their own four walls while outside it's as if nothing has happened.

But still, it will be strange getting used to the quiet.