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PRIVATE PARTS IN THE GENERAL MAYHEM

Commodore Koogie

July 7 2005. The news filtered through without significance at first. London was another world – on the outside rather than the centre of everything as it usually is. Four bombs had gone off in London and killed many people. One of the bombs, in Tavistock Square, went off on the number 30 bus right by the statue of Gandhi I loved to talk to when I worked and studied in that part of town. Then the news became significant. After everything we'd done and worked for – after we'd poured love and passion into the world to change the paradigms of coercive power and harm to ones of possibility and creativity – the memory of this summer for the majority of people in the UK would be of a violent and desperate act, an affirmation that it is only violence that really changes anything. So I went to the field of flowers beside a bend in the river, beside a glimpse of another world, our eco-village in Stirling, and lay down in despair to cry.

The gentle and sympathetic wildflowers of Scotland were willing to lend an ear. But their message of hope was being drowned out by one of those bloody helicopters which the police insisted on flying over the camp morning, noon and night to spy on us and intimidate us. And so I ended up lying in the field looking at the helicopter feeling sorry for myself. Then gradually I started to see the flowers around my body and face, and the sky above me, which was a fresh blue with little clouds scudding by. And I started to look for hope. And while I looked for hope and relished the beauty of the place, the dappled greens and

purples of the hills, the oak tree standing in full leaf at the edge of the field... I stopped seeing the helicopter. It was there, I heard it above somewhere – but I'd stopped seeing it. It had dropped outside of my circle of vision because I chose another view.

The previous May I'd walked onto St. Werburgh's – a community farm in Bristol – to find a little green caravan with big flames painted over its wheels and swamped by a large solar panel on its roof. An old, silver van stood nearby with a large tarpaulin sheet and a big bundle of camouflage netting with plastic flowers entwined in it, making it impossible to untangle, sitting nearby. I also found a friendly, somewhat stressed group of people in a state of general mayhem (a clown name if ever there was one) and a couple of sets of old army uniforms which needed pieces of pink and green fur sewing onto them in time for a show which was to start in a couple of hours.

That first show lasted about four hours, and torrential rain tested our tarpaulin shelter to the full (literally – we had to keep emptying rainwater over the sides that had collected in the middle, threatening to drown our audience in a great deluge at any moment). The performers told tales of civil disobedience, reenacted the Fourth World War, drilled a puppet clown army to imperfection and showed videos of beautiful and hilarious acts of rebellion and resistance from around the world. Meanwhile the audience struggled to hear what was being said over the sound of the rain and children and see what was happening in the fading daylight with the aid of little blue fairy lights. And something rather special happened too. The rain made the audience huddle together, and keeping the rain from bursting the roof became something everybody started to participate in. They may have been cold and a bit damp but they stuck with us right to the end and everyone ended up laughing together. There was real warmth in that audience and while we learnt some important lessons about lighting, how to sort out the rain shelter better, making the show shorter and giving it more structure, there were also lessons to be learnt about hope and about good things coming out of seemingly impossible adverse conditions.

Bristol was also the birthplace of my clown. Clown training was a two-day intensive course in the art of rebel clowning and non-violent direct action in a church hall and community theatre space. We learnt to become aware of each other and protect each other as a group; we learnt spontaneity and our 'presence' as performers was nurtured as everybody's confidence started to grow. We started to remember how it felt to play and shape the world to us and this vital skill would go with us into the actions round the G8.

Again and again people's clowns would emerge and we would all love them and learn to recognise them. A clown is not made in a day – or even in two days – or a week or year. It's a changing, intrinsic part of a human being, and cannot be 'finished' any more than any other aspect of a person. I can only describe this from my own experiences, but it seems that my clown is the most vulnerable part



of me, the only human, silly, playful part. It is also a magical, shamanic part that can walk right up to the edge of my ingrained, social limits – where obedience ends and disobedience begins – and dance on that edge until it dissolves or bends or stretches into a different shape. I'll try to explain.

I didn't see how clowning would work on the streets, in the 'front line' of direct action, during the training in Bristol. I wouldn't really understand properly until a moment on July 2 when two clowns stood in front of a line of policemen, who had encircled and contained a group of activists in Edinburgh, all looking stern and grim, but still wearing bright yellow jerkins nonetheless, and started singing the banana song: One banana, two banana, three banana, four...

One by one a larger group of us joined in, the song gathering volume and beautiful harmonies (we started to sound really good) as we went. It took on a life of its own and suddenly we were more clown than not clown and at some point the faces in the line in front of us started to twist and contort in the strangest ways. One guy's eyebrows went into a steep 45-degree angle and his lips pressed together tightly, as his mouth got wider and wider. And then it dawned on me. They were desperately trying not to laugh. They failed, of course, and I finally understood how it was our vulnerability, standing there with nothing but our humanity to protect us, that was our best defence against repression. For a few magical moments, the police were no longer a 'thin blue line', absurdly protecting society

against itself, or the rich and powerful few against the mass whose lives have become a poor second place to capital, but fellow human beings with different personalities and, weirdly enough, even a sense of humour. As they started laughing, they stopped being a line – physically stopped standing in a line. They too were vulnerable as they tried not to laugh and embarrass themselves in front of their fellow officers.

Running on biodiesel bought in exchange for the oil used to cook free chips for our audiences, the silver van and little green caravan criss-crossed the country, connecting with people in London, Birmingham, Sheffield, Manchester, Newcastle, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh. I was seeing a different UK – one not cast through television or newspapers but seen and felt in the flesh. The Metropolitan Police tried to scare off our London host by saying that we were ‘not a normal travelling theatre company’.

Undeniably true and proudly quoted, the real us were and are the best antidote to the fear-mongers – whether they be police or corporate media. We pleaded our case with local authorities and landowners again and again just to be able to get the show on in isolated car parks, in town centres, in green spaces. Again and again, hope won over fear.

We spent summer solstice at the northernmost point of the tour in Aberdeen, around a fire by a fast flowing river, flooding and silver in the full moon. We were fast reaching the culmination of all our efforts, the clowns getting fatter and juicier in the belly of our little green caravan. The police must have felt it too as their Forward Intelligence Team filmed our penultimate show for posterity. ‘You’re nowt but a bunch o’ cloons!!’, a street alcoholic yelled at one point. If nothing else, we’d got the point across to at least one person.

Our final show took place by the Cre8 Summat community garden. Built on a piece of land destined to have the M74 motorway extension plastered all over it, it was a brave and beautiful design. The clowns were starting to connect with the rest of Dissent! and some of the other projects that had been going on to make links with the local community in Scotland. I think it was our best show – brim full of pleasure from start to finish. It had taken all the problems and difficulties, all the inspiration, everything that had happened between Bristol and Glasgow to reach this point. All the people who’d put us up on their floors, or in their beds, who’d cooked us dinner, who’d helped with the logistics, who’d come to our shows, who’d engaged in debate, who’d asked questions, who’d trained with us, who’d wandered into the infoshop, who’d heckled, who’d decided to trust us... were there in that final show. And it was all of us who played keepy-uppy with a big blow-up beachball of the world to the sound of Louis Armstrong’s ‘What a Wonderful World’ who symbolised the web of connections that is our movement – the one that is counting its blessings as it launches the world, spinning into the air, again and again.

Around two hundred clowns emerged in Edinburgh. They emerged as we



all put on our face paint on the morning of the Make Poverty History march. Everyone's clown was different and special and every clown contributed to make magic happen while the governments of the G8 tried to make everyone forget their illegal wars and open up the way for more thefts – of lives, land and resources. The clowns made magic happen while four suicide bombers planned their final exits. It happened when clowns kissed the perspex shields of the riot police, leaving lipstick kisses. It happened when they bowed down in front of a line of police that just happened to be called away at that moment – making it look like a rapid retreat before the unbearable worshipping of the clowns. It happened whenever a policeman laughed or smiled against his will. It happened when we played grandmother's footsteps with the police in Faslane. It happened when we and some members of the public got a puzzled stare from a member of the marines observing us from the loch through a pair of binoculars as we 'hid' behind small leaves and strands of grass for camouflage on the shore. It happened when the crowd became clowns to support a bloke sitting on the fence of the naval base and embarrassed the police for intending to arrest him by singing and playing games, the rules to which they never seemed to get. It happened with games that the police did become complicit in – turning scenes of confrontation into parties: a game of pontoon to get our big blow-up beachball world back from outside the police line, a game of giants, pixies and wizards – where a line of police and a line of clowns ended up hugging. It happened as we ran helter-skelter

down the A9 – the unusually silent road transformed into a giant playground full of fun things like traffic cones.

The clowns fished and socked with love and various other emotions, marched in almost imperfect formation or scattered in all directions to escape containment. And we did it all by consensus, by spokes-council, with no leaders. 'I'm Clown Knickers! No, he is! No, she is!' we responded to police questions of 'Who are the ringleaders?'

And who can deny that clowns are enchanted creatures before the maniacally grinning face of the Clown Castle episode? The day before the main blockade, we still didn't really know what we were going to do or where we were going to go. Rinky Dink, a bicycle-powered sound system, and its attendant eccentrics knew of a place we could stay in for the evening. No one let on but we all put our trust in them and piled into minivans, which took us out of Stirling, across the river and towards Gleneagles and Auchterarder. On a hill in the distance we saw the turrets of a fairytale castle amongst the trees. 'Wouldn't it be funny if we were going there!' we joked. 'Ha ha' said the universe as we pulled open-mouthed into the driveway of Cloan House. As the clown army danced to Rinky Dink in the manicured gardens of our castle and centre of operations, we learnt that a previous owner, one of the Lords Haldane, had been the founder of the modern British army...

By the time we got to July 7, we were exhausted. The tour, the actions, the clowning had taken us to the limit both physically and emotionally. The healers of the eco-village, those who designed and set it up and maintained it and had done all the local outreach and liaised with the council – everybody who found all the tat needed, who kept things clean – all of them prevented us from falling in a big clownish heap and not moving any further. The Healands barrio kept us together, body and soul, with their wonderful food and warm hearth, which was kept burning into the night as we recovered from the actions of the day. They were – the whole thing was – really amazing.

And so why all this palaver? What were we actually doing? Did it really change anything? At least the G8's intentions were good, weren't they? And surely a world with them keeping things under control is not as bad as a world without?

The grand claims of the G8 to bring poverty in Africa to an end and slow down climate change were a con. Make Poverty History and the genuine goodwill of thousands of people was hijacked by the British government and its pet pop stars. The governments of the eight most powerful countries on earth came to the conclusion over those few days that climate change is not an urgent issue. Important, but not urgent. As chunks of ice the size of countries break off from the polar ice caps, as flooding and freak weather conditions spread across the earth, killing thousands, as species disappear and ecosystems are destroyed every day. Not urgent? Surely these people are insane. And make poverty history in Africa by opening up economies to foreign investors who will continue to plunder its

rich resources as they have done for centuries and leave nothing but exhausted soils and devastated landscapes for the miners and farmers and their families who were worked to death to facilitate that plunder? This is what privatisation has meant for those in Latin America, those in Asia, those in the Middle East, those invisible unpersons hidden in the cracks of our own nation state. Misery, not happiness is what it has meant for millions over the last few hundred years.

The governments of the G8 and the CEOs of the multinational companies they serve are fools. But we are fools too. We are the kind of fools who can step outside the paradigms of coercive power and laugh at the limitless absurdity of the capitalist system in order to understand it. The amount of debt to be forgiven will be offset by a reduction in aid to the poorest countries, which will be reduced dollar for dollar according to the debt forgiven (which will be paid back by other means to the international financial institutions to which the G8 is accountable). This makes the G8 meeting nothing more than an exercise in spin, a PR opportunity that the global justice movement is seeking to discredit as an exercise in cynicism. This is why we blocked roads, why the clowns conducted Operation HA HA HAA (Helping Authorities House Arrest Half-witted Authoritarian Androids) to keep the ministers of the G8, the eight most dangerous terrorists in the world, behind the fences at Gleneagles, where their brand of insanity can cause no more harm.

I stopped seeing the helicopters in Stirling because they stopped mattering that much to me. There are other things that matter more, that actually deserve my attention, creativity and energy. Those things won't sit in a suit at the other end of a long boardroom table or in the freezing wastes of an opposing political or ideological pole, because they aren't to be found at the extremities of life, but in the thick of things. They can't be fundamentalist because they are part of a web of beneficial relationships where equality is a communal garden, an everyday kind of practice. Those things are sensationalist only in that they taste delicious, or look sexy, or feel gorgeous. Those things are the playthings of the strange, vulnerable, surprising, foolish and imaginative. The infinite pleasure of being clowns may just be able to confuse and distract long enough for that other world – the one that is possible – to be born.