

Trump-l'oeil and The Age of Humans

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(not sure I can bear to look...)



I grew up in London England with a single mother, one of seven children, the last three of which were triplets (I was the girl bookended by two boys). My first memory of anything remotely political was Harold Wilson's pipe (on his first go round as Prime Minister). The way he sucked on it reminded me of Uncle Dick and as nefarious as that might sound this was actually a good thing. Men with pipes often had pocket watches and waistcoats. They sat back in their chairs and didn't ask you to sit on their laps. Your space was over there and theirs was bordered by whiskey, a newspaper, and checkered slippers; details of the avuncular. I liked Harold Wilson. The Huddersfield tyke that still peppered his speech had me thinking he might be one of us, left of right and fighting for the common folk. Of course I was common but he really wasn't as common as I liked to think. His dad was a chemist and his mum was a school teacher and Harold Wilson (actually James Harold Wilson), went on to earn a first class degree from Oxford which by definition sort of lifts you out of the 'common'. First class degrees from Oxford occur about 33% of the time and given that your odds of getting into Oxford if you apply in 2017 are about 17%, and only then if you go to the rights schools, Harold Wilson's successes were not very common, but no matter, that is why I liked him.

It was impossible that I was going to be anything but a future Labour voter. Our variegated family lived for four years in a halfway house, where my mum who was half black and half white (you could say that back then), railed against her injustices as loudly as she disappeared into her place. I knew my place early too. Apart from being a future Labour voter I also knew that I wasn't supposed to challenge the status quo. Harold Wilson was in power the year I failed the eleven plus and I didn't challenge that either, although I wanted to. My conciliation was to attend a comprehensive school in Acton which had several things going against it not the least of which at the time was its W.3 locale. What did I know about secondary education? Well I knew enough to assume that the path it had in store for me included clerk typist at the Metro Button Company or data input assistant at Chibnall's. So this was the beginning of my own attempt to

rail. They were mostly temperamental protests that burned bright and short then simmered for a while until stoked by a new indignation. There were a lot of things I didn't like about England then but probably the biggest resentment I harboured on my first day at comprehensive was the fact that I had to wear my failures in my school uniform (cheap), free dinner ticket (which was plastic and reusable and did not look like everyone else's), mulatto skin (could say that then too) and wiry hair. There was no hope that I was ever going to blend or worse rise above the determinism that settled like fog around our council estate.

Politics didn't get much noisier than that for me until I was about fifteen. It touched me in the same places that I could reach out and touch: free bus passes, free dinners, free school uniforms, and free from academic aspiration. Well I wasn't really free from academic aspiration I just went underground with the idea that post-secondary education was an option for the likes of me. Edward Heath (Ted) was Prime Minister when I was turning fifteen. He also went to Oxford by way of grammar school but was considered to be from even lower middle class roots than Harold. His dad was a carpenter and his mother a maid (that qualifies as working class to me), but apart from that what he had going for him he was that he was from an intact family, didn't appear to have a drop of color in his blood, and most celebratory, he was a man.

Ted Heath was a Tory and had the kind of tortured accent that I always associated with the royal family and their ilk, although his had to have been developed on his rise through the academic ranks given his starting position. By the time I was listening to his speeches his voice seemed as strangulated as his ideals. He took England into the decimal age and membership into the European Union. I didn't think either were a good thing. I also remember that this was the first time I took much of an interest in what was going on in Northern Ireland although I do vaguely recall my Irish Catholic father ranting rhapsodic about those Protestant bastards before that.

I became even more interested in Northern Ireland after I made the England schoolgirl netball team and we played a match against them, I think in Edinburgh. There were a lot of firsts at that tournament. First plane trip, first performance as a national player, first time God Save the Queen was played when I was representing the flag. The Northern Ireland team told us what it was like growing up in the war torn streets of Belfast and how even entering a newsagent's had restrictions and potential jeopardy. It was 1973, the same year that the Provisional Irish Republican Army set off a car bomb outside the Old Bailey and the same year that I first started to see that there were at least two sides to every story.

Harold Wilson came back into power in 1974 and in 1975, the year I finished my 'A'-levels, (yeah you know it, I took two and earned one) I decided to head off to Canada, as you do. Canada was the closest thing to America I could find. No disrespect to Canada but I had been keeping a presumptuous secret. I wanted to go the Land of Milk and Honey; the great melting pot where great myths and legends were made. I knew that wasn't Canada but I had relatives in Canada and with my British passport and unearned bit of colonial belonging I managed to get myself in. It was September 27th, 1975 when I landed in Toronto to be picked up by my seven year older sister with the excuse that I was going to be attending her wedding in a few days. Really it was all a ruse. Not her wedding of course. That was lovely. No, I mean my exclusive desire to attend when truly I saved every penny from my summer job at a greeting card manufacturer in Southall, bought myself an all-purpose maxi cardigan from the Trafford catalogue and headed off to the wrong side of North America to exercise my free will. Council estates and comprehensives be damned.

A funny thing happened to me when I got out of the airport in Toronto. Somebody actually asked me if I was English. Well to be precise they said, "Oh you're English aren't you?" Well this might have seemed quaint to the average Brit, especially at its first asking, but to me it was commendation of mammoth proportion. In all the years that I lived in England no-one ever thought I was English. They said I was black, a wog, a nigger, and the golly on the jar. They too also asked me where I was from but not with the praiseworthy curiosity that it was being asked in Canada. No, usually it sounded more like, "where are you from? You're not from around here. Why don't you go back to your own country?" I had naively thought that I was in my own country and without any insight into which country might be mine the search for a place to fit had me running around in some very dark circles. But suddenly there was Canada. All full of Canadians who seemed to think that the bends and breaks in my little accent had something more going for it than West Ealing. I was a cause celebre. I couldn't order beans on toast without being noticed and all because I was English and not at all because I was a bit black. Canada was alright. I found myself a job, albeit illegal, and a nice Jewish boyfriend, which I also later discovered, was somewhat illegal. Shiksas beware...

Pierre Trudeau was Prime Minister and his lovely wife Margaret kept the Toronto Sun newspaper shining brightly with her escapades. By 1977 I had become a legitimate resident and was working full-time while also ploughing my way through pre-college chemistry and Canadian history because the constraints of my council twang were now boundless in Toronto. I had a lovely job that I was only good at because I had an English accent and therefore realized I never would have had had I stayed in jolly London where chavs like me were ten-a-penny. To be fair the term chav didn't come into use until way after I left old Blighty and by the time I heard the phrase I had joyfully elevated myself above its definition, so I guess I was really a pre-term chav.

I loved Pierre Trudeau, fifteenth Prime Minister of Canada. Trudeaumania has had its second coming with Justin, but Pierre set the bar high. He was a liberal bon vivant - loud, exuberant, and largely very pleased with himself. Pierre made it so much easier for me to also be quite pleased with myself. His francophone message drizzling with arrogant possibility leached its way into my inferior marrow and jump started my stem cells. I was about to grow into a whole new person. With glowing hearts we see thee rise the True North strong and free. Pretty soon I was a Canadian and there is nothing better than a Canadian with an English accent (well maybe except an American with an English accent). I finished chemistry (boring) and Canadian history (politically incorrectly more boring) and applied to university. I was the first person from my family to attempt that feat so when I got my acceptance letter from the University of Toronto I nearly broke my face trying to master smug disbelief. If only that arsehole 11 + teacher Mr. Birkenhead could see me now!

I worked that first year like a woman trying to get elected President, hard but not really as hard as I could have so I got into the program that I applied to, physical therapy, but not really the one I wanted, medicine, because that glass ceiling was simply too high and I was after all still only embryonic. I graduated with my bachelor of science in physical therapy in 1982 and promptly got a job in sports medicine. I was still paying my rent on my credit card mind and dragging myself through winter with a pathetic excuse for a coat and a housing situation that shall go unexplained. I had risen above the common. Would you know that in 2017 there is approximately a 10% acceptance rate into the physical therapy program at University of Toronto, I bet it was a lot higher in 1979 when I got accepted but nonetheless it was a coup. Canada

elevated my status by giving me street cred and I took that reflected confidence and earned myself a degree and a place at the table. I didn't see myself as an immigrant even though that was my title – landed immigrant. I thought I had had sidled under Canada's working class radar and academic meritocracy with my blustery West Ealing accent but that wasn't it at all. I had always entered through the front door, a legitimate permanent resident with all the rights and obligations of movement toward integration and citizenship. Immigration gave me a chance I never believed I had in my country of birth which ironically was nowhere near the third world. Canada stood proudly behind its objectives of immigration and here I was genuinely participating in the social, cultural, and economic benefits of becoming a Canuck. K. D. Lang was now my idol.

Well Canada is a young country and like all young countries it is full of robust immigrants and I met myself quite a few. One in particular I married. A Syrian, Muslim, cardiac surgeon, not exactly the trifecta unless you plan to live in the middle east, but hell it was a lot better than atheist, council house dwelling progeny of a half black single mother who often went out without her knickers (my mother that is). I was of the mindset back then that I thought I got the better deal. It's still true that marrying up if you're a woman can elevate your status faster than climbing up the ladder of success for yourself and that's a fight I will take to my scattered graves. Nevertheless, we were both immigrants and ironically me more desirable in some respects than him because I wasn't from a despot run dictatorship and yes, even back in 1986 Syria didn't exactly have healthy diplomatic relations with a lot of the world. Why does it matter might you ask? We were living in Canada now, our home and native land except that Canada wasn't giving jobs to British trained, Syrian born cardiac surgeons, at least not this one and not in 1986. So south we went.

The United States of America was my third country and his fourth or fifth. I was giddy with anticipation, in total disbelief that this nappy haired girl from Mattock Lane was going to move to San Francisco. Ronald Reagan was President, no mind I couldn't vote yet. It took me a while to get into the American mindset but I was up for it. There still wasn't a day that passed where someone didn't ask me where I was from but it no longer had the dubious connotation of suspect heritage. Well maybe when I was in Texas it did, but I was more robust by then. We had our children in California before settling in the Midwest where hockey was everything and my sons became cheeseheads. I loved Wisconsin, not on sight, especially when I found out that there wasn't anything much that was brown in a 75 mile radius including cappuccino, but that changed over time. Lots of things changed, including Presidents. There was war, loss of loved ones, questions of faith and the taking of new citizenship. I got to know this country from the inside out. It wasn't all the things I had imagined and it was more than I could have conceived. Living here helped me to take stock of the two countries I had left and there were many things I loved about both of them. Nostalgia has a funky way of tainting memory and shrouding the ugly in desert flowers. I miss Canada and England and go back to both often but I have come to know America as home. It's where we raised our children and watched them step into their lives with all the idiosyncratic nuances found in immigrant families who start in one place and end up in another.

I went back to school and earned a master's degree and later a PhD, I was going to be doctored somehow. We moved again, to Cleveland, the year before 911, when for the first time I felt the truly patriotic rush of uniting with my countrywomen. I also watched my children go through a

brief but nevertheless difficult period of explaining their Islamic roots to their Catholic school peers, and they did it well and stood in the glow of America's just and verdant message. I felt I had a voice and the right to use it and it was because of that right that being in discord with the decisions of my government, although gave me concern, didn't leave me in complete despair. Everything that I believed could be challenged against the backdrop of the Administration in power calling the shots. We had voice and that voice was respected. The irony of course is that I wasn't born here. I didn't grow up here, in the dark legacy of land appropriation, American slavery, the African diaspora and the fight for civil rights. I grew up in England where slavery was abolished in 1833 some thirty years before ratification of the 13th Amendment. I grew up in England where class and caste nevertheless had ultimate power filtered as it was through the cloudy prism of racism that had plundered the continents in its colonial reach. I left England because I felt strangled by that legacy only to find myself oddly mired in a cultural and religious morass of my own making, trading one inadequacy for another. But that is part of another story.

What is part of this story is what I see happening now. In this country of mine that I chose as proudly as I believed it chose me and my family of gay, multi-racial, Muslim, atheist human beings; doctors, nurses, therapists - all caregivers whom this country has given much to and to whom we have also gifted ourselves. Yes, fortunate enough to have come in through the front door knowing only too well what it feels like to be made to stand at the back. Dreams aren't just languid states between something and nothing. Dreams are the steps taken between hope and actualization, desire and achievement. They are a reflection of a single-minded belief that life can be better than this, not for one person or that person but for every person. They are equalizers and purveyors of opportunity; they are in great part what this country was made of. Not because it is the greatest country in the world but because it seeks to be bigger than that. It is from our First Amendment that all the others fall: the freedom to be, and say, and do, that which does not infringe upon the rights of others to also be and say and do. We seem to have lost this mission to the fear and the noise. The noise a discordant birdsong captured in early morning tweets designed to pre-empt all other sounds with a cock of the head to establish the pecking order.

Are we to be swayed by the plume, the feathers and the gilt, the epic dance between the fake and the more fake? Are we to believe the trickery as good magic made by wizards of wonder and the sorcerer's apprentices? Illusions are not dreams they are misconceptions at best and deceptions at worst. They are intended to misguide and take us in the wrong direction. They fool us into seeing what isn't there and tempt us to consider that there is substance to the figment of imagination that is driving us toward peril. Illusions are for art they have no place in the concrete, three dimensional spaces upon which we all stand, upon which this country spread its eagle wings. Who amongst us will be the one to shatter this man's precarious illusions and bring back reality to that egg-shaped office he occupies in the White House?

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