

*Roger Nash*

## **The Banjo Case**

Not so long ago, though it keeps getting longer, some four-year-olds lived in a small village in the south of England. They were utterly remarkable, but only to themselves. Peace had just been declared at the end of the Second World War. The village itself had had no strategic importance in the recent events; unless to scavenging foxes, their shoulder blades as sharp as coat hangers, who had their own hard time of it when chickens became scarce. The horsetrough in front of the bakery was clearly indefensible; and the seat round the bottom of the elm had no more treasure buried beneath it, after one of the children picked up a bent and very skinny penny.

A long tricycle ride from the elm tree, and you would probably need an apple to eat on the way back, lay the flat and grassy fields used by the planes. Bombers had taken off from there at night, usually returning well before morning. The children didn't see them often, though they heard them from their beds, and watched their curtains shimmying with the noise. Their questions were discouraged. The bombers had gradually come to seem like big iron bees, buzzing cavernously to something distant that interested them; frightening, but as natural as other night-time insects. Then things changed. The grown-ups all became much happier. Events took a dramatic turn for the better. The children found this disturbing. Was it only they who noticed?

Before, if the children had been up late, and caught sight of a line of black bombers clambering up over the tousled tops of the trees, they had instinctively looked away. It was something you wanted to watch, like a rabbit dangling from the blades of a harvesting machine, its twitching

back reshaped as a triangle; but something you couldn't watch for long. Though the iron bees were carrying their stings elsewhere, their dull drone filled the sky above the village with the sure promise that, somewhere, field after field of rabbits would be dangling and stiffening soon; and more than rabbits too.

Now, with peace declared, the bombers only landed. They never seemed to take off. It went on for weeks. There were more bombers, and of more different kinds, than the children had ever seen. This was the first thing to alert them; though the grown-ups seemed happier than ever before, and continually going to parties when it was no one's birthday. That bombers landed without having taken off, had all the disturbing features of things coming down that had never gone up. It was as though hundreds of balls just kept tumbling down out of the elm trees, when none of the children had thrown one up.

Something else that alerted the children was that the planes came in during the daylight, right before your eyes. Mothers, aunts and grandmothers, who, during night-time flying, had fairly quickly looked away, now eagerly nailed their eyes onto the incoming specks, pointing and waving. And the planes were no longer at all shy about being seen. They came in lazily, wagging their wing tips over the village, even circling it, before dropping out of sight below the hedgerows. The older children learned to point and wave too. But the four-year-olds pushed up against their mothers' aprons, or ran inside with the even younger ones. Iron bees were still clearly iron bees, even if they wagged in the sunshine.

As remnants of bomber squadrons returned from various outposts of war, using the airfield as a staging point, the sky was in a continual uproar. Some of the children began, nervously, to play further afield. It was a bit of a novelty. Thunder kept coming out of a cloudless sky, and no rain fell. None of them noticed any lightning at first, either. That came later. They got used to the thunder, without actually liking it. They no longer had to screw their eyes shut, fingers poked firmly in their ears. They began to notice things that the grown-ups couldn't, being so busy indoors with their birthday parties.

If you were playing by a wall when the thunder came, the wall seemed to shout back to other nearby walls. Then they would all go hoarse in a pounding hubbub together. But the well shouted only to itself. The shout went round and round inside it, and got sucked down the shaft

to the water at the bottom. You could tell when it had finished swallowing its shout. That was when the water began to wobble. The well got rid of a lot of thunder that way. In this respect, it was a good place to play by, though otherwise strictly forbidden. A particularly deep rumbling overhead drove ripples across the horsetrough and ponds. The ripples were shaped like long spiked nails. None of the children had seen ripples like that before.

Occasionally, the drumming in the sky was built into their games. It could make balls of spit bounce across cobblestones, just like beads of milk spilt on the stove. To win, your spit had to bounce right across the road, into a flowerbed opposite. The most difficult part was its hopping the curb, but it could do that too. The boys got some laughs from how the girls' cotton dresses kept trembling on them, even when the girls stood quite still. The girls were called "scaredies" and, later, "scaredy-planes." But that was only until some of the girls noticed how the boys' shirt-sleeves were just as agitated, in the rarer moments when the boys were still. After the first few weeks, it was almost possible to shut out the clattering roar, as another line of bombers climbed down through the ravens and treetops. Instead, the children developed a nervous interest in seeing what new things the sound could do as it got loose in the village. Returning airmen strolled into the village, on the path that came out by the elm tree. Some of them talked a bit funny. Nearly all of them walked with a stiff bounce that came in midstride. That was like the jerk and then push of a clockwork train, when it hasn't been played with all summer, and the spring needs oiling. As with the trains, it soon wore off. The seat round the elm was usually packed with pilots. There was plenty of treasure there again, as they gave away chocolate and chewing gum, but no bent pennies. When they first arrived, they liked dancing in the street by the bakery. Even the grandmothers danced with them. But they soon settled down, and spent hours just sitting and listening to the leaves above them. They talked quietly among themselves, and wrestled matches constantly in and out of clusters of pipes, looking up when the next line of planes came into view. After a while, people didn't look up much any more. Only Mrs. Deakes did, and put on her red skirt.

Once, an airman piggybacked one of the boys to the airfield, to show him some planes. Otherwise, that was out-of-bounds. Afterwards, the boy said how, walking on wing tips that no longer wiggled, the covers of the

cockpits looked full of clouds. When you stuck your head inside, you could smell that lightning had struck there many, many times. The skies themselves, however, remained clear and blue, as if clouds drifted by only in bombers now.

After two weeks of nearly daily dancing in the streets, the mothers quietened down too. But the dancing went on in the front of their eyes. Perhaps that was why they didn't see what was happening, though the smallest children could. It wasn't surprising they failed to notice how spit could bounce. At their age, mothers can be presumed to have run out of spit anyway; or they spit in a terrible hurry, just to get done with it, and don't stay to watch. But much was afoot in their house-proud homes, right under their noses. However, as some of the children remembered it afterwards, the changes in the houses took place after the changes outside. It seemed to be spreading inwards.

The first thing that happened was that the house cats all disappeared. Some of them were seen walking together into the fields. Even cats who usually fought each other like demons went silently side by side. They didn't run, but put their paws down firmly in front of them, to show something was on their minds. Later, they were found to have joined the farm cats, but only in the most distant and broken-down barns.

Inside the houses, the battering roar of the bombers was a little muted, especially in the older cottages, with stone walls wide enough to keep summer out and winter in all the year round. But even there, things started up. You might be sitting at table, sometimes with even your eyes dribbling as the food was brought in. Though food got rationed, no one had thought to make belly-growls take it in turns. As you grabbed the soup tureen with both your eyes, you could see how the thin broth sent up curiously separate little puffs of steam, as though it was panting anxiously. The more the planes landed, the more anxious the soups got.

Not long after the soup started panting, soot began to travel down chimneys. As it happened, the whole village had had its chimneys swept not long before, as the sweep from town did his rounds through the countryside. At first, only the finest powder fell. Later, huge crusts and lumps tumbled out on the hearth-rugs. Mothers and aunts certainly noticed these. They grumbled as they cleared up the mess; talking to their knees as usual, to stop them getting cold on the flagstones. But the next moment, they were in a fresh dress, and off to the bakery, for dances or

even bread. It didn't seem to strike them as odd that just-swept chimneys could shower down centuries of soot. After a while, the chimneys slowed down, but each day they scattered fresh black scabs on the floor. It was as though the chimneys had all hurt themselves badly, and kept bleeding inside. It went on for so long, that the children wondered whether their hearths would ever heal.

Once, one of the children left her crayons on the kitchen table for a whole day, lying about on some paper. By suppertime, the crayons had scribbled a view from her life that made everything look as thin and as tangled-up as an abandoned ball of string. To the children, it was clear that something had shaken itself loose in the village, and could not be tightened up again. Peace and the safe return of the airmen had done what war, somehow distant from their village, had not. The children sensed that when their own fathers, who were sailors not airmen, returned, the men would notice the changes no more than the mothers had done. It was possible that the smell of lightning would come back with them too, stuck to the bottoms of their heavy boots together with the smell of occasional dogs and the sea. Those whose fathers returned turned out right about that.

Today, those events in the village are over forty years ago. But no one seems to have reported them yet. Perhaps it is too late now for things to be reversed. As it happens, I was one of those children. I can still remember my grandpa's banjo case, propped against the wall in the cold front room. My brother and I were forbidden to touch that banjo, while grandpa was away at sea. The instrument leant there, nonchalant as a sailor, waiting for him to come back and half-sing, half-roar as usual, after supper, to help my grandma get the dishes clean. She would sing too, in a light and floating voice that sounded full of sunny soap-bubbles from the sink.

One day, towards the end of the time of the bombers' return, my three-year-old brother and I found ourselves promisingly alone in the house. Hauled along by the gravitational force of the forbidden, we met in the front room, beside the banjo. The room was forbidden too, except on Sundays, and when accompanied by an adult. It was filled with an ormolu clock, a glass case full of shepherdesses and commemorative mugs, and one giant spider that swung commandingly in the perpetually unlit fireplace. I already had the banjo case laid across my knees, easing

out the straps, when the shepherdesses suddenly began to shift and rotate on their shelves, crooks rattling loudly. This was to be expected, and left us undeterred. It was merely another squadron of bombers lowering themselves in. Then, with horror, we heard the faint sounds of strings being stirred inside the nearly opened banjo case.

We ran to the door we had so carefully closed to avoid easy detection. But before we could reach it, the varnish-darkened door gave a heave and shake, like a black bull irritated by flies, and slowly shuddered open. We could hear floorboards beyond it creaking with heavy footsteps. We looked at each other in chilled desperation. We were both quite sure that grandpa, in the unutterable wisdom of his wild black beard, had somehow anticipated the exact moment of our misdeed, and run invincibly across the stormy wave-tops from his ship, to take charge of the banjo and stop us. Frantic not to be discovered, and not to meet grandpa in a moment when his remarkable powers were quite so fully revealed, we ran to the open window, and lobbed ourselves through. It was actually a blessed relief to land among the erect spears and drawn knives of the prize rose-garden.

An hour later, after circling around the house with extreme caution, past the coal bunker, over the apple tree, under drenched ferns and foxgloves, we found no trace of anyone at home. In fact, we never encountered grandpa again. His body was found, covered with oil, drifting three miles from where his battle-broken ship had foundered in the Irish Sea. By the time the last bombers were landing, it was clear to my brother and me, on legitimate Sunday visits to the front room, that the banjo strings had retuned themselves to a different and more jangling pitch than grandpa would ever have approved.

I have the banjo in its case beside me now, an ocean and almost a lifetime away from that village. Somehow, I never learned to play it, though I play several other instruments. Wherever I moved across the world, the sound of strings being stirred by a stealthy hand went on steadily. It made no difference whether I was living beside quivering truck routes or in quiet backwoods. Lately, though, or so it seems to me, the noise has been getting louder. The dog has started looking at the case inquiringly, teeth at least half at the ready. I must put the banjo up in the roof before our guests come to stay this weekend. An increasingly uneven music is playing, playing.