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Finsbury Park

by Ivor John

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I couldn't ever forget, 9th October. Late that evening the IRA had blown up Green Park Tube Station. A man had been killed, several others injured. The man who did it, had been driven off along Piccadilly towards Hyde Park in a getaway car.

Of course I knew Green Park Station well. I lived, with my mother in Stoke Newington. Just the two of us. We had a housing association flat in Sandbrook Road. Most of the time, when I met my school friends, we would hang about, a group of us, in Clissold Park. When we had been younger, we would take bread and feed the swans, which often swam in the river in front of colonnaded Clissold House. Or we would feed goats, that would come bleating and baaing over to see what we had for them. I used to love watching those goats. I suppose I still do, but it is so much different now. Things have changed so much. In those halcyon times, everything was fun. All things were a pleasure.

When I was eleven and moved schools to the nearby SNS, Stoke Newington School, Pauline, my mother, said that I could go into town on my own. The rules were, there had to be at least two friends with me and that Pauline knew where I was going and who I would be with. She didn't really approve of me meeting boys, but girlfriends from school. We would catch the tube from Finsbury Park. Sometimes we would go to Leicester Square if we took the Piccadilly Line or if we took the Victoria Line, Oxford Circus. But most times, we would get off at Green Park, which is why the news had resonated so much. I could not believe that, that a place I knew so well, and visited often, had been blown up.

The 9th was a Thursday, nearly forty-seven years ago. But I can remember every moment of that day. It was half term and so, three of us, me Danielle and Rose, she hated to be called Rosemary, decided we would go into town. Pauline was reluctant to let me go.

“It’s too dangerous, I don’t want you going, not with the bombings going on.”

A week or so earlier, a bomb had exploded in Oxford Street. Earlier in September another IRA bomb had exploded in the Hilton Hotel, killing two people and injuring sixty-three more. Although I was aware of these things, they weren’t important to me, not then a pre-teen existentialist. It was more important that I could see David Essex on Top of The Pops that night and if Pauline could afford to buy me a new pair of jeans. But there was an apprehension about being in Central London which I was unaware of and now find hard to describe.

I am not sure if I persuaded her to let me go with my friends, or if I just petulantly insisted. I know that we argued and that I was upset when we showed our tickets and got on the Southbound Victoria Line at Finsbury Park. We didn’t go to Green Park, but got off at Oxford Circus. Danielle had some money for her birthday and wanted to go to Chelsea Girl in New Oxford Street. We didn’t go along Oxford Street. It was still closed off to traffic and we could see that there was police tape further along. Despite my bravado, I could feel an anxiety I had never experienced. I managed to subdue my increasing feeling of panic, but I did wish that we hadn’t come. I think the others could see that or maybe they felt the same. We did not stay very long before we caught the tube from Leicester Square, Piccadilly Line, back to Finsbury Park.

Later, in the evening, the news of the bombing at Green Park interrupted The Sweeney, and I realised despite the odds, that I could have been there. Of course I would never have been there at that time, but my sense of youthful immortality had been shattered forever,