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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Society of Timid Souls**

Written by Polly Morland

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# THE SOCIETY OF TIMID SOULS

or, How To Be Brave

Polly Morland

**P**  
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# Introduction

The day is bitterly cold. I see steam blooming from a man's lips as he jumps down from the trolley car on the Upper West Side at Broadway and 73rd Street. His feet hit the icy sidewalk and the streetcar clangs away with all the acoustic precision that sound has on very cold days. He tugs the brim of his hat low over his eyes. The other passengers from downtown have been discussing the war, but he has not been thinking about the Japanese, or Hitler, or bombs. He has instead been thinking of his hands on the piano keyboard. The thought makes his mouth dry. Gripping the leather handle of his music satchel, he hesitates on the street corner for a moment. Then he sets off, crossing Broadway with a grey crowd of Sunday strollers. He skirts the upper edge of Verdi Square. Through the trees, the statue of the composer stands, his back turned as if to eschew the sorry kind of musician the man has become. He walks on past the Central Savings Bank, glancing up at the clock above the door that says it is a minute or two before four o'clock. Crossing Amsterdam Avenue onto West 73rd Street, he stops for a moment to check the advertisement torn from the newspaper and now folded – a little furtively – in his coat pocket. Number One

## The Society of Timid Souls

Hundred And Sixty. There it is – on the right. He passes beneath the portico and steps across the polished hallway into a wood-panelled elevator. With a clunk, he is lifted skyward and when the elevator boy yanks open the metal grille again, the man finds himself at the inaugural meeting of the Society of Timid Souls.



Only fragments remain about what really happened that January day. We know that the year was 1942. We also know that just four unsteady piano players responded to the first advertisement placed by Bernard Gabriel, a professional concert pianist, publicising a series of meetings to be held at his Manhattan apartment on the first and third Sunday afternoon of every month. In exchange for seventy-five cents apiece – to cover, so the notice in *The New York Times* read, ‘refreshments’ – fear-wracked musicians were invited to step in out of the cold and ‘to play, to criticise and be criticised, in order to conquer the old bogey of stage fright’. They were to assemble at Sherman Square Studios, high above West 73rd Street, in a room bare but for two Steinway grand pianos and so extensively soundproofed that no one would hear what went on behind the closed door. Inside was Maestro Gabriel, with no formal qualification for this work other than a confidence beyond his thirty years. Gabriel was, it was said, ‘non-timid’ and duly he proceeded to deploy what he called ‘strange and devious methods’ to inoculate those in attendance against their fears.

By the early summer, the Society of Timid Souls numbered more than twenty and on 17 May, *The New Yorker* sent along a reporter, Charles Cooke, who happened to be a pianist himself. First Cooke encountered the silver-haired Mr William Hopkins, who told him, ‘I’m old enough to

know better and I'm scared to death,' before plunging into a Respighi nocturne. Next came Mrs Moeller, who grew flustered if the audience was silent. Then Miss Simson, who panicked even when others played. Finally, the mysterious inoculation process was revealed, with the revival of a Timid Soul belonging to a Miss Flora Cantwell.

'This afternoon,' said Bernard Gabriel, 'I'm going to kill or cure her.'

Flora Cantwell sat down at one of the two pianos and began to play an étude. As she stumbled through – so Charles Cooke told his readers – Mr Gabriel moved among the Society members handing out props, a whistle here, a rattle there, occasionally pausing to whisper something into another Timid Soul's ear.

Miss Cantwell finished playing.

'Again,' said Gabriel and the moment the étude resumed – pandemonium.

Miss Simson blew Bronx cheers on a Bronx-cheer blower. Mr Carr spun a watchman's rattle. Mr Hopkins repeatedly slammed the door. Miss Cohen warbled *Daydreams Come True At Night* and Mrs Moeller flung the Manhattan Telephone Directory at the floor.

Flora Cantwell tucked her head down and kept playing.

Bernard Gabriel now crashed his hands upon the keyboard of the other Steinway, shouting, 'You're playing abominably, but don't stop!'

She did as he said and rising from the piano at the end, Miss Cantwell reported, 'I could play it in a boiler factory now.'

Bernard Gabriel's apparently comical methods proved to be remarkably effective. Many Timid Souls claimed to have been 'cured' by a dose of his 'anti-toxin' and, a year later, Society membership had doubled to include timid actors, timid singers, timid public speakers and timid parlour

entertainers, each of them desperate to learn – or to remember – how to be brave.

The rudimentary exposure therapy techniques improvised those Sunday afternoons on West 73rd Street, while not unheard of, were certainly ahead of their time. In 1940s Manhattan, qualms like those of the Timid Souls would typically have been treated with rest and barbiturates; or if you were very modern, perhaps an evening of dream analysis at a ‘Freuding’ party. ‘*In vivo* flooding,’ as methods like Gabriel’s later became known, would have to wait a further thirty years to gain much in the way of clinical credence. And yet this was how the Society of Timid Souls were healing themselves – and each other – every other weekend.

Copycat societies soon followed for nervous fashion models and others. Even Charles Cooke, the piano-playing reporter from *The New Yorker*, was whispered to have gone native and signed up as a Timid Soul himself. Said Bernard Gabriel triumphantly to the correspondent from *Reader’s Digest* who visited in April 1943, ‘I can see no reason why the shy and timid in any community couldn’t get together and help each other.’



It would be easy to dismiss the Society of Timid Souls as a period piece, quaint but scarcely important. I did at first, but then the timing of Bernard Gabriel’s experiment in stress inoculation caught my eye.

For the first meeting of Timid Souls was called just four weeks after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the United States joined World War II. While Jewish refugees had been flooding into Gabriel’s Upper West Side neighbourhood for many months, now America itself entered the fray. That very evening, 7 December 1941, a teacher at

the Modern Piano School in New York City noted in her diary how Bernard Gabriel had been warming up to play a concert as news of the Japanese attack came over the wireless. And I imagined how pre-performance nerves must now have mingled with a deeper fear that ran through everyone gathered there that night and in the streets beyond.

My curiosity was piqued. Further scrutiny of what I still assumed to be little more than a historical coincidence revealed that this Society of Timid Souls had offered its whimsical response to big ideas and world events in other ways too. For the phrase 'timid souls' was not Mr Gabriel's own, nor did its origins share his affection, or at least his sympathy, for those cowed by life's little anxieties. 'Timid souls' comes instead from a famous speech given in 1910 by Theodore Roosevelt, in which the President invoked a muscular apparition of courage: 'the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; ... who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.'

Roosevelt's rhetoric is thrilling, of course, but it was Bernard Gabriel's enterprise that I found myself admiring. I felt uplifted by how quietly radical its rehabilitation of the very idea of timidity was. For however stirring the ideal of 'the man in the arena,' the substance of Roosevelt's argument seemed to have missed the point about timidity, a point that the Society of Timid Souls intuitively understood: that the world is not populated only by square-jawed heroes and snivelling cowards. Instead, whenever the times are troubled and fearful, then or now, the vast majority of us find ourselves somewhere in the middle, wishing to be brave and yet easily frightened by what is frightening. Either that, or we are



capable of facing real danger one day, the next scared out of our wits by something comparatively trivial.

Consider, for example, this striking account of a Timid Soul redeemed on West 73rd Street, one of the last to have been printed about the Society. It concerns a young man, Sidney Lawson, who had grown up with a fine tenor voice and in 1941 had sung in Robert Shaw's Collegiate Chorale. Then came the war. Young Sidney joined the infantry and left New York before his twentieth birthday to fight overseas. A year later, he was shot and paralysed for six months. Along with his innocence, it seemed, gone too was Lawson's love of the stage. Technically, he could sing as well as ever, but performing now terrified him. Finally, in the late spring of 1945, Sidney Lawson joined the Society of Timid Souls. There, week after week, he forced himself to sing in a room full of people who 'stared glassily, milled about, rang bells, booed. When he bowed for applause, they shouted that he was a ham' – so reported *Time Magazine* in August 1945. Eventually, however, Lawson summoned the courage to take a party booking at the Hotel Pierre, one of New York's glossiest hot spots. With a gold army discharge stud pinned to his dinner jacket, Sidney Lawson took the stage once more and, singing songs from the shows, the young war veteran was reborn. He was signed the next day by a big Broadway agent.

As if to confirm what I now saw woven into the story of the Society of Timid Souls, the largest meetings at Sherman Square Studios – those with forty or more in attendance – and the swell of press coverage that accompanied them, turned out to coincide with the paroxysms of 1944 and '45. Most telling of all is that, by the end of 1946 – for no apparent reason other than that war was over and things were looking up – the Society of Timid Souls seems to have sunk without trace, its season passed. Bernard Gabriel moved on

to other musical enterprises and the Timid Souls dispersed forever into the Manhattan crowds.



I began to wonder whether there was more to this Society of Timid Souls than met the eye. Gossamer threads of connection seemed to lead out from its trifling eccentricities across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, suspended gauzily between war and politics, psychology and identity, courage and fear.

Certainly, in the years since 9/11, our understanding of these last two – courage and fear – has cleaved to a belief that there is now, more than ever, an awful lot to be frightened *of*. However cosseted and comfortable the age – or perhaps because of it – our collective nerve has faltered. We seem to have forgotten how to step up to the plate and our global media has surrendered to a taxonomy of terror: the planet warming, the bankers squandering, the terrorists bomb-making, the paedophile lying in wait. Whether justifiable or not, fear then becomes so infectious that once you are frightened about one thing, suddenly, you are frightened about another, and another, and another, however commonplace. Then your mother is frightened. And your kids. Soon your neighbours. Then the whole street. And on it goes. Before long, there is a Timid Soul quaking in his or her boots everywhere you turn.

In February 2003, in the run-up to the Iraq War, the international advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, launched an Anxiety Index to track the market implications of this pandemic of dread across the globe. After surveying consumers about their levels of fear regarding issues such as war, terrorism, ill health, crime, job insecurity and economic instability, their findings were startling. According to

the Anxiety Index in 2009, 78 per cent of Americans were nervous, compared to 22 per cent who were not. In Britain, that ratio was 73 per cent anxious to 27 per cent cool. The Russians were plagued by 84 per cent apprehension to only 16 per cent of people who lived relatively free of it. The most jittery of the lot? The Japanese, apparently, of whom 90 per cent were locked in a cycle of worry, and this was before the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011. The Chinese and the French were the only nations where fewer people admitted to being anxious than not. As the global economic crisis has eclipsed al-Qaeda as the fulcrum of our unease, the financial markets fix their gaze upon indices and metrics of fear too. There are scales of volatility that even offer opportunities to make money out of *how afraid we all are*.

Disquiet creeps everywhere. And, in the process, courage drifts into crisis. Everyday overcomings seem harder to achieve in a world where apprehension has become the norm and our ability to distinguish what is and what is not scary is skewed. Sensing and regretting our communal timidity, we then grow hungry for its opposite, this rare delicacy, bravery. Whereupon our media and politicians feed the appetite, dishing up an account of Courage and Heroes, so seasoned with drama and cliché that it is mouth-watering and easy to digest, but hardly nourishing. And so the cycle of timidity continues, a vicious (as opposed to a virtuous) circle.

All the same, What We Talk About When We Talk About Courage is not, thankfully, the same thing as courage itself. For what Michel de Montaigne called ‘the strangest, most generous and proudest of all virtues’ does exist and always has. It was there in the Torah, the Bible, the Qur’an, the Vedas, the scrolls of Confucius, the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Nor has it ever passed out of fashion, which cannot be said for all of the cardinal virtues. (Prudence, anyone? *Temperance*?) Yet today, in a secular culture that yearns for

authenticity and belief, true courage remains pivotal to our morality and our aspirations, the best-loved of all the old virtues. Epic braveries or modest ones, ancient or modern, there is such optimism implicit in them all. They speak of the power of one small man or woman, or some group of men and women, and their refusal to be merely buffeted by fate. All courage involves some level of dynamic engagement with a world that, however cruel, it is possible to change in either great or subtle ways. This optimism *in extremis*, this silver lining to the cloud, is surely why courage stands unimpeachable and future-proof. And however out of touch with it we may be, it remains, as C. S. Lewis remarked to his old friend Cyril Connolly, 'not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.'

The extraordinary staying power of courage is perhaps surprising if you consider how disconnected it is from the everyday. For these 'testing points' do not come often, and yet each of us hopes that when the hour of need arises an intention and a desire to act bravely will mean that we do. In an age of anxiety, where trouble is perceived to be around every corner, these 'testing points' feel closer and we worry about them because, of course, in a crisis, many people do not step up. Hoping to be brave but falling short is clearly of no use. And yet when someone, who seems apparently small and ordinary, *is* brave, it gives us all hope. It is this transformation, however momentary, from Timid to Brave Soul that sits at the heart of how we measure ourselves as human beings.

Which brings me back to the Society of Timid Souls. For what they discovered was that being brave can be as infectious as being afraid. Moreover, as a group, we can be taught to help ourselves. Together, we can learn to identify our enemy, or our fear. We can rehearse being brave, a kind of training that inoculates us against the most debilitating apprehensions. Indeed, put like that, it almost sounds like

an invitation, does it not? I can all but hear that remark of Bernard Gabriel's, uttered with a bright, clipped delivery and a showbiz smile:

'I can see no reason why the shy and timid in *any* community couldn't get together and help each other.'



These words and the story behind them had now well and truly worked their way under my skin. They seemed both timely, then and now, and strangely timeless too. And so I found myself increasingly identifying with the Timid Souls who met at Bernard Gabriel's studio, one of those diaphanous threads connecting to my own shoulder. The reason, of course, is that I too am burdened with a soul that is timid and, a little like my brethren on West 73rd Street nearly seventy years ago, I find myself yearning for a way to overcome it.

I have spent most of my working life making documentary films, often about apparently brave or at least daring people and so I have periodically found myself in hairy situations with guns, criminals or warring factions. Indeed, conscious of having an apprehensive nature, I got into the habit of egging myself on into these encounters, only to be so anxious once embroiled that feverish displacement activity seemed to be the only way to endure them.

Let me give you an example, one that combines the terrible aftermath of war and – God forgive me – unfeasibly large pants.

In the summer of 1999, I spent four weeks in Kosovo at the end of the war there. I was working on a programme about a British police team sent in on behalf of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia to excavate a series of suspected mass graves on the edge of one small town. Our film crew had been told before the trip that we would

be required to wear white paper forensic suits both at the graveside and in the makeshift mortuary, and that we would be changing alongside the police who were to undertake the exhumations and autopsies. Upon hearing this, a colleague had cracked a nervous joke about not getting caught in skimpy underwear and somehow the idea lodged. Hardly a seasoned war reporter, I spent the following week before we flew out haunted by febrile imaginings of what a mass grave might be like. And on the day of departure, I found myself in Marks & Spencer, procuring pants large enough that they might somehow protect me from the horror. Preternaturally vast though these smalls were, they did nothing to blunt the grim scenes we found upon arrival. What they did accomplish was to amuse everyone immensely, from bodyguard to pathologist, at a time when mirth was in short supply. My Martha Gellhorn moment it was not.

A decade on, I have three young sons, and I have found myself daily exhorting them to be brave – about a nightmare, or a grazed knee, brave about a spider high on a wall, or a first day at school. And they go right ahead and do it, inoculating their own Timid Souls against fear with astonishing efficiency. They are not striving to cut it as film-makers, nor to follow some blueprint of human virtue. They are just busy growing up and learning how to be happy. Consider then, how learning to be brave in adult life – and not just among soldiers or skydivers – could, should and does have the same liberating effect upon grown-ups too. As Anais Nin wrote in her diary in 1942, the same year that the Society of Timid Souls first came together, ‘Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.’ So am I crazy to imagine this one tiny transparent strand, threading all the way from the 1940s on West 73rd Street to me, sitting at my desk today?

That is why – a deep breath – I have decided, here in these pages, to call the Society of Timid Souls together once more.

## The Society of Timid Souls

Our strange times could do with such a fraternity, and so could I. If you would care to join me, then perhaps together we can work out how to be brave. I understand that you are probably not some havoring, quavering piano player, nor am I any Bernard Gabriel. There will be no *in vivo* flooding, little music, perhaps only one or two Bronx cheers. Instead – and this shall be our new Society’s undertaking – I intend that we discover what it means, *truly means*, to be brave and that we do it by seeking out some people who should really know.

And so it is that I have done, for me, a rather bold thing. I have quit my job, packed a voice recorder and a notebook. Welcome to the reconvened Society of Timid Souls. Now come with me. I am scared to go alone.