

Pas de deux

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PAS DE DEUX

by James Barr

It was hard for Joyce to realize that after all these years his mother was dead at last, but the evidence was there; he wore his only good suit, his new shoes. The faint odor of the souvenir flowers the undertaker had cut for him from the sprays on the casket lingered in the house and remnants of the funeral cakes, pies and salads the neighbors had brought in that morning were still on the ancient oak buffet. She was dead at last.

He sat at the kitchen table stirring his fourth cup of black coffee as the ashen Mid-Western dusk settled more deeply into the room. At last he felt like weeping — not for his mother, he had shed enough tears for her in the entirety of his life, but for himself. He was almost thirty-eight years old and utterly alone. But he was also free for the first time in his life. He could smoke in the house if he liked, he could play his few records anytime he was at home, he could sleep until seven o'clock instead of five-thirty in the morning for he no longer had to fix her breakfast tray and do all the house work *before* he went to the drug store where he worked, he could eat lunch at the soda fountain regularly if he wanted, having a chicken salad sandwich, toasted, with a strawberry milkshake and coffee without worrying about what it cost, he could even put by a bit every week now toward a small television set. No more doctor bills, no more charity to choke down from his townspeople. He didn't even have to go to church anymore. They could get another organist for all he cared.

The room had grown quite dark. He liked it that way, but he got up and turned on the light, otherwise the near neighbors would be saying, «Poor old Joyce, he misses his mother so. Really, dear, we should go over and sit with him at least this evening. I imagine he doesn't know what to do with himself after all these years of living just for her. He was a good soldier even if he didn't see the inside of an army.»

Poor old Joyce! Didn't know what to do with himself, indeed. He picked up his coffee cup and drank with deep relish. He knew what to do with himself. He'd had thirty years to figure that out. But the best laid plans of mere men do go wrong he'd learned to his sorrow just that afternoon. Quickly he poured more coffee into his cup at the stove and thrust the painful thought from him for just a while longer.

There was a concert in the city on Sunday. He could go down by bus, buy a cheap seat and come back for five dollars and two cents. How often he'd figured that out, then forgotten the whole scheme as his mother had said suddenly Saturday noon, «Joyce, dear, let's have a big dinner tomorrow and ask Grandma McCune and the Uhling sisters over. I haven't entertained them in three weeks.» Intuitively she seemed to know when there was something that might take him away from her, even for only a few hours. And always he had replied with the rather vacuous smile she preferred to see on his face, «All right, Mamma.» And he'd spend from five o'clock Sunday morning until nine thirty cooking

and baking, then rush off to Sunday School and Church to play the organ and rush back to have dinner promptly by one o'clock. He'd always served the ladies at a special table pulled up to his mother's bed. By three he had cleaned up the kitchen and started the muffins for their tea at four thirty. Supper was at six in his mother's bedroom again and after dishes there was just time for Sunday Night Endeavor. Of course, he shouldn't be ungrateful, it was the church that had paid most of their hospital bills. That had been his life. Without an alternative he had been devoted to the greedy old woman who had given him life, and to the community who liked him so well because his misfortunes always made them a bit happier with their own limited lots.

Thirty eight years old. Joyce put down his cup and walked to the dingy mirror over the kitchen sink. Was it too late? The lines between the blue eyes and upon the tall pale forehead said thirty eight, but when he smiled suddenly, thirty eight diminished considerably. Chicago, New York, California, Miami. Could he really risk getting a job in one of those places? He shivered before the old dream now within his grasp — almost. A job in a fine department store where the clerks who dressed so smartly were like himself. He'd seen them in Kansas City and Tulsa and once in Dallas when the Smiths took on their vacation to care for the twins, dressed in handsome dark cheviots and gabardines, even gray flannels in Nieman Marcus, with beautiful, conservative ties, rich cuff links, rings and watch straps of gold and shoes that gleamed like dark satins. He had noticed their hands, manicured, long fingered, wide, verging on strength but somehow never quite achieving that effect. He had listened to their voices, low, caressing with inflections that had no place in the discussion of materials, sizes and styles. He had watched their eyes that had travelled over him and had then grown friendlier and confiding. How he had longed to sell shirts or shoes in the same department with them, to have his own small apartment to ask them to for supper occasionally. What fun they would all have! And perhaps if he worked very hard and got a salary raise one day, then perhaps there might be someone to share that apartment when he got home at night, someone who perhaps didn't make quite as much money as he did and who depended on him for some of the comforts and a few of life's luxuries. It was all he could ask of life for complete happiness he told himself again as he brought out these ancient stuffs, so long folded away in his mind. Complete happiness? From habit his mind turned to minor miseries to fend off again the engulfing immensity of the main hurt inside him.

Thirty eight years old! Still, it was more than twenty five years before he could draw Social Security. If he kept that in mind he couldn't really seem too old to apply for a job in a strange place among people he did not somehow understand.

Such an old dream, he thought curiously, going away to a big city to live among his own kind in tranquil anonymity, a dream that had begun in high school and had ended suddenly on the Sunday before his thirty-second birthday, the Sunday he'd fallen through the ice on the creek while skating. After that he hadn't wanted to go away. Hans Spahn had saved his life, had carried him to his car, had wrapped him in blankets

and then had carried him into his house, had taken off his skates and clothes, had given him brandy and a hot bath and finally, best of all, tucked him into his own bed to sleep the rest of the night. Hans: hands that had been big and firm and smooth as stone . . . a cheek, accidentally brushed against his own in the wintry wind, like cold sandpaper . . . a lock of graying hair hanging over a sunburned forehead, and with gentle laughter, the smell of whiskey combining with that of wet wool.

The inevitable dream, for so long immediately at hand, had begun for Joyce. Hans, the only son of a German immigrant farmer who had grown wealthy from wheat and then oil, had a wife and two teen-age daughters; but Hans had recognized Joyce's nature without words, perhaps without complete understanding, and in recognizing had drawn closer to him with that strange curiosity that quickly manifests itself as an affinity in some men when their own youth has expired. It had been a beautiful dream lasting six years, and ending only today when Joyce had expected to ride to the cemetery with the Spahns only to find the high school basketball captain sitting next to Hans in his place as he approached the car.

«I'm sorry, Joyce, we're full here. I think the Suhlers are planning to take you.» Then, for the first time at his mother's funeral, Joyce had turned away and wept. Not for her. Never again for her. For himself.

Years, six of them, feeding on a dream to keep going. No. Not merely to exist; to walk the streets of his small town, the lowest of the low among the material minded but with the security of a young princeling.

They had played checkers, and later chess. That was their excuse for being together so often at first. Later Hans fell to bringing his wife over in the evening in his big Cadillac. She would visit with Joyce's mother, crocheting, exchanging gossip. His mother actually had believed it was she the Spahns came to visit. Hans' wife, a great eyed, rather bovine woman whose beauty had stretched into fat years ago, was not happily married. But she was quiet and stupid in her sadness and because she was not oversexed she was happy with only sorrow. She and Joyce's mother were excellent companions and a deep sympathy had grown between them. What the old lady had needed to make her physical infirmities complete was the mental state of hopelessness of Hans' wife. In return she found all sorts of physical symptoms of grave lingering illnesses in the younger woman, attentions that were received with tenderness and thanksgiving. This sad exchange gave the two women innumerable hours of contentment.

While in the kitchen, over forgotten chessmen, Joyce brought out his few treasures; his complete sets of Shaw, Wells, Huxley, his Mozart, Vivaldi and Monteverdi, his Daumier prints, Degas, Vlaminck, and showed them to a Hans dumb with half amused wonder. Once, after a bit too much mulled rum from a thermos that pretended to contain only coffee, Joyce had said, «We're rather like a ballet, Hans, this whole town, you and your wife, my mother and me.» And even as he said it he knew he must not fill his cup again from the thermos. «We're like *Swan Lake*. Each of us has his solo and duet parts and the town is the *corps de ballet* in the background.» He had paused, frowning. «Only *Swan Lake* is a tragedy and we shouldn't be.»

And Hans, defenses flat to the ground, had taken Joyce's long slender fingers in his hard blunt ones and replied with a still half embarrassed smile, «I'm like a weed in the fields and you're like a flower in a glass house. That is the only tragedy for you.» It was the nicest compliment Joyce had ever had. He lived on its nourishment for months and even now, years later, its sweetness had not lessened.

It was then Hans had asked the question that had first linked their minds and Joyce, who had pondered the answer many a sleepless hour was compelled to reply, «I'm sorry, Hans but so long as my mother is alive, I can't. Once it begins for us, I can never treat her unselfishly again. I would grow to hate her once she spied out my happiness and set out to hunt it down and kill it as she's done everything else in my life. I must wait.» — Hans had argued but at last come to admit that Joyce was right. So long as his mother lived, Joyce was a condemned man. In those six ensuing years he had learned to love Hans deeply. He had wanted him physically more than anything else in the world and now, today, when he was free, he had found Hans with a younger man beside him, a beautifully formed young boy whose white arms and legs flashing down a basketball court made Hans ache with longing. Joyce knew that because they had discussed it. Yet Joyce had felt himself safe for he was sure that in their small village he was the only one Hans could turn to for the one thing he wanted so much.

And the look on the boy's face. He had looked at Hans as if he were a god. At first Joyce had tried to tell himself that it was because of the oldest daughter that the boy was riding with the family. They were the same age. But Joyce had lived against the rough side of life too long to be deceived by the smooth texture of self deceit however pleasant it might be to the touch. There was only one answer; somehow Hans had bridged the impossible gap between their ages, one 18, the other almost 50. Thirty eight! What if he was as slender and supple as a man ten years his junior? What did the wisdom of twenty years patience mean in the face of inexperienced youth, Joyce asked bitterly.

He turned away from the mirror. Perhaps if he stayed on at the drug store the young basketball hero would graduate and go away to college. But no. Hans would not be the same. The memory of a youth can be as an acid in an older man's mind. Instinctively Joyce knew that. He would take his vacation starting Monday, the vacation his mother hadn't succeeded in making him work for the extra money. He would go south, as far as Texas. Surely he would find work somewhere with his experience and the excellent recommendations the merchants would give him. He'd go by bus. It would be cheaper.

He took off his good coat and hung it up. He'd play some Tchaikovsky, read a bit more of Rebecca West's *Meaning of Treason* and go to bed. He was very tired.

The knock was soft, almost furtive. Joyce caught the back of a chair and gripped it, closing his eyes. It was one of the neighbor women coming to console him with a kind good night. It could be nothing else. He forced himself to go calmly to the back door and open it. The night was milky with clouds, saturated in the flood from the moon. There was

no one there. Then a voice from the shadow of the lilac hedge came to him, sweet with hesitation.

«I walked up the alley. I thought perhaps . . . you could give me a cup of tea . . . or something.» Joyce refused to believe what he heard until Hans continued, «I had to explain about this afternoon. The boy is Laurie's steady since last Saturday night.»

«I know, I know,» Joyce said quickly, wanting to stop the pain of apology in the voice. He went swiftly to the dark hedge, stumbled and was recovered by hands that were still as smooth and firm as stone . . . a cheek that, now without accident, was still like cold sandpaper. And for no apparent reason the night of the mulled rum leaped again into his mind. The dancer was no longer on stage alone. A partner had entered from the wings. The music from the house was swelling. Their *pas de deux* had begun.

PATERNITY

E. M. Forster once remarked: «If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I'd have the guts to betray my country.» Too much emphasis (he believed) could not be placed on *personal relationships* because they were the stones with which to build the larger structures of society. To establish a good personal relationship is very important but no relationship, no matter how precious, exists in and of itself. Since we live in mortal bodies, all relationships remain threatened and contingent, a fact true of those deeply rooted in sex as well as where the sexual element plays a minor role.

Therefore, in order to validate itself, the relationship must avoid exclusiveness. When two human beings are together, they should constantly look to something else, as if from the top of a light-house; the married couple looks to the child; the homosexual to art or to a common interest of some sort.

Without minimum affinity, homosexual relations cannot survive, which is why every attempt of an intellectual to live with «trade» breaks down.

In order to justify itself, the relationship must look to something beyond itself. When children come into the world, they break the tight nature of the marriage and this problem may be solved. Kierkegaard once wrote: «If a married man were to say that the perfect marriage is one where there are no children, he would be guilty of a misunderstanding. He makes himself the absolute . . . every married man by means of the child becomes a relativity.»

What, then, is the role of the child? A child is a mysterious gift of life that cannot be had by wanting (although the sincerity of the wish may help.) To really bear a child, one must bear with the child. That is, to have a child, in the fullest sense of the word, a man and