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Asserted by a Simple Pin

by Jason Owen

for Marcòs

a poor exchange gift

I

Does the name of the city so very much matter? lovely though she is, and usual though it is to give a beloved a name — for I did fall in love with her, just as, more briefly and ardently, I experienced another kind of love while in her. But to the city I can always return, be faithful; unlike my human lover she will still be there, instantly to re-enchant. Yet I am having to fight this reticence actually to name her, as if to do so would be to vulgarise by virtual publicity a certain side of her life ('this is where you'll find what you're looking for, boys—and there's a 'plane leaving at three!') — well enough though that side is apparently known, although was not before to me, who had thought myself fairly well up on the various 'mores' of European cities.

This was certainly not the city—this side of it—which I was seeking when I flew in from London one late-July evening, alone, merely en route for a bordering country whose language I spoke but wished to speak better (but eager also to acquire, in passing, another town); released as only once every year from workaday tediums and their enclosure of my spirit. As soon as I had settled in an hotel, I set out, as in a new town one impatiently if sometimes a trifle insecurely will, on a scout of the offerings. These dusk had not quite yet covered, although lights were already beginning to bobble reflected in the obiquitous water, and to brush the foliage of the soothing trees. The spell was as immediate as it was unpresumed ('and how should I presume?'); and I had come armed with enough recommendations towards the more obvious of the city's two lives. But—such was the way that with a sudden ripple it was—before I had chance to follow even one of them up, my help was sought by another stranger in the international city towards an address which he was seeking. As well as recommendations, I already had a street-map; and, together and each of us glad of the casual comradeship, we managed to locate it. By the time that we had done so, my companion had by a well-phrased question already gauged that I should not too darkly scowl at what he expected to find there. ('Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?' / Let us go and make our visit.') I had been then in the city less than two hours.

There was no number outside the completely plain door, a bell only for admittance. We rang it; and, once inside, were, on production of our passports, enrolled for a small membership fee as two of 'our foreign friends / nos amis étrangers / unsere ausländischen Freunde'. And there it was, scarcely yet ticking in the earlyish night (which, out of England, would of course continue until practically dawn). Perhaps most appropriately it can be said in German, impersonally, passively: 'es wurde getanzt'—men together, when it was not an occasional female couple or, far less usually, a pair mixed in gender: there in the dimly lit well of

the dance floor, clustered about with its bars, into which, unceasingly for seven and, Saturdays, even eight hours, the most vital and atmospheric records of the day generated their rhythms and their moods of sentiment and gaiety.

After what I had occasionally seen in the bordering country for which I was headed, I was not shocked by what I saw here, only surprised at the scale of it and at other characteristics which I was quickly and welcomingly to discover. And I was old enough and self-knowledgeable enough to be tolerantly accepting and also blandly amused. My own participation in the offerings did not particularly enter my head. This was, in any case, a night of initiation, during which drink soon enough relaxed me and allowed me to appreciate (as I always will anywhere) the uninhibited joviality of the establishment, in which everything was done without pretence and with the zest of fun. People laughed; and there was remarkably little mannered effeminacy, which could in any case always be shown a cold shoulder if it was thrust too closely at one.

I had, and have, little experience of 'clubs' of this sort in other countries, my own included; but of certain tendencies in them I felt reasonably sure: the, to me, distasteful 'camp' effeminacy, and the vicious cat-and-mouse games played (age twisted mercilessly, degradingly, on a pin: youth the exploited currency in a treacherously unbalanced market). Such a milieu is one from which, with luck and a firm grip on myself, I prefer to remain quite apart; something about which I just do not want to know. But it was the almost total opposite to this which existed in this gush of high spirit and goodnatured confederacy that integrated me so thoroughly and so soon.

Of the four nights which I spent in the city which I only ever left because of a rendez-vous made in the bordering country) I always returned to this club: sometimes I stayed until the end, sometimes I left as early as three o'clock and (by chance as much as anything—why deny it?), except for once, always alone. I made friends—on that particular transient level and in different tongues; even met people from the same region of my own land, so far away almost as if from next-door; eventually felt quite at home, as any club-member anywhere will, with waiters and with fellow-members; was greeted each time I returned. I drank (not excessively, because of a stomach upset by its broken routine); sometimes I danced—and sometimes, if I could have found a partner, I would have danced more (as I always will: I like *dancing!*). Here, an expression of the freedom allowed, it was often dancing of an overtly erotic intimacy: as a pompous, stout, pedantic observer attempted over complexly to interpret for me in a German vocabulary beyond my reach.

In a way, however, I was sorry that that side of a city with which I had fallen so easily and happily in love (with her reflections by night and her assertions by day; a city beautiful, exhilarating and honest) had presented itself to me quite so soon; so that my gestures to the other, more open, side of her life were more perfunctory than I would have wished. Make them all, though, I did; and thoroughly enjoyed making them: drinking in stimulating company in the old liqueur-tasting house (and feeling afterwards so bemused in the sun-stroked early evening that I

beamed solitarily like that Cheshire cat and out of sheer joy and the need to express it almost threw myself into a canal); joining in the exuberant song in a tavern in the seamen's quarter, joking there with the plump prostitutes who all seemed to be accompanied by huge, sentimental dogs. Breathlessly, I did the art galleries, made the round-water-tour, climbed to the observation heights; the jangling melodies of the brightly coloured street organs dancing through my head as with very light heart I sped from one to the other, beside the water, beneath the trees, over the aged paving stones, past façades familiar from paintings of centuries before. I was glad to have these experiences; felt my truer (i.e. my better-known) self as I had them. But always, eventually, as a framework to it all, I returned to the club; was even more won by the city's 'other' life.

II

It was my last night, and three o'clock in the morning (as a record may very well have been appropriately playing): only one more hour to go. I was on goodish (that is to say, animated) form, for my stomach had recovered (the local beer a better cure than bismuth powders). I wanted to dance; but, just those odd few years older (although by no means yet on that twisting pin), I was always a little wary of re-buff. The expertly chosen music was tantalising me and I was all-aware that only a few hours ahead I had to be on my way, to leave all this behind; its uninhibiting licence and buoyancy. I hovered there at the edge of the floor, my feet, indeed my whole body, restless as the tails of fidgety cats. And then my roving eye all at once took in sitting quite alone in a seat which in the dimness had not seemed to be occupied before (it was a Monday night and not quite so full) a boy, dark, compact, soberly dressed and rather grave. Tentatively I approached where he sat and hovered there some moments more. And then I braced myself to the needs of the fast fading hour: 'Möchten Sie tanzen?' I hazarded, do or die, in the language which in that particular continental corner seemed surest for immediate response; but very much at the ready for that old re-buff, to move on, seek further, wind myself up to ask again. But 'si, señor,' I thought he said; and indeed, Spanish, he had.

I should like to think that it is drink which makes it all seem to have happened more quickly than it actually did (otherwise, it could have happened with anyone); for I am anxious that nothing should mar my experience of Marcos, in its dignity and concord and, I could never deny it, its sweetness. That nothing should be as important to me as my discovery of the city in which it happened; rocks for recollection, both, amidst the dull grey swirl of the rests of too many enclosed years to come.

III

It was English which we were speaking: which he did with a gruff and hesitant charm, bringing to it all the courtesy and composure of his own tongue and culture. Almost instantly I had been overwhelmed in every nerve of me by how he felt in my arms, by the utter trust and sincerity with which he was suddenly there. It was the atmosphere and the hour and the city in which unhesitatingly to tell him so, and his

generous response only made me feel it the more. 'You also are so very nice,' he spoke and showed. And then his: 'But I am so ugly . . . ' 'No, no . . . ' But why (hopeless of reproducing their tones) repeat more than our main sentences, inflict the small sentimentalities of the late hour and the dim lighting . . . In this accord more complete and immediate than any I have known in my life I asked him—clutching at moment, at sympathy, at a very human body—to stay with me the night, to prolong what with such rareness and speed we seemed to have established together. This, however, was not possible: in but an hour's time he must return to his ship; but all the next day but one he would have free for me. I had, that afternoon only, cast my die; as a necessary discipline, sent my vanguard telegrams, reserved my seat aboard the next international express (that I bothered to take it up I think that I shall regret for the rest of my life). But if my hotel were near he would come with me there and then. Within a few of the fleeting minutes we had left.

'Please,' he said, 'we will not leave together, for I do not wish my friends to see me go. If they know, they will say: Marcos, do not go.'

Closely, exploratively, we walked along the bank of a canal, deserted now and diffused with a nocturnal green, and leading to my hotel.

There—gently, briefly—love was made.

For us, merest 'Wandervögel' in a city uncommon to us both, there was in all one hour between three and four o'clock in the morning, in which to register indelibility, incredulity, and thanks to the gods of human passage and propinquity. Dominated though it was by time and place, this was an act in celebration of a sympathy so complete and rare in the drift together of flotsam in the nights of strange and often dangerous cities; driftwood to seaweed in a touch always latent with risk, guile, deceit and despair; not only 'body' but 'sympathy', 'rapport', counters with a price to be determined by the next throw of the liar dice, odds indeed in a race of rats. But in this city it was not like that.

As we dressed again there in the deep darkness of the curtained hotel-room—creatures heeding the tick of a clock—he suddenly took my head in both his hands and put his mouth very close to my ear. Slowly and deliberately he whispered: 'I . . . will . . . remember . . . you . . . all . . . of . . . my . . . life.' Then he took breath before: 'I . . . will . . . ask . . . God . . . to . . . bless . . . you.' In the back of my sadly-cynical, fading-bruised, young-old mind I had to be aware of the tendency to extravagance in Spanish compliment; yet, to the extent of a complete inability of immediate response and of even a moistness of eye, I was considerably, dissolvingly moved. For a moment or so, I sat quite still on the bed; and then, tenderly, I brushed the hair from his forehead and made lightly there the sign of a cross in which I did not believe; but which I felt to be a response he would understand and which, in the terms of what I wanted to express, was not false. With an eager darting gratitude, he kissed me. It was then, I think, that I bent solemnly and kissed the crowns of his feet where they rested still bare and firm upon the floor. 'Wait o wait,' he cried mutedly, 'that I will do for you also.' And slowly, almost ritually, he also bent to the floor. He continued then his dressing; but, as he was putting as a final touch the pin into his tie, he stopped.

'This,' he said, in the darkness, 'I will leave for you . . . It is not much, but it is as a memory of a Spanish boy.'

A second gentle but devastating salvo had been levelled against my self-possession. 'Marcos,' I said, humble, reduced, lost, 'I have nothing to give you . . .'

At the bottom of the hotel stairway we kissed for the last time, after I had lowered my eyes and then looked back up at him with all the puzzlement and sadness which, as well as delight, he had aroused in me. 'Yes,' I said, 'Marcos, I think that I shall always remember you also.' He pushed the hair back from my forehead.

IV

We walked, two small men, of a size, back the way we had come, for him to find again his friends before the end of the club's night just as if he had never been away; and I talked to him with all the earnestness and simplicity which I knew. My idiom became indeed that of the night, of that one charged hour; one of transference almost, the tempo and inflections of my speech those of Marcos himself, as if I also were speaking in a second tongue.

'Marcos,' I said, 'please tell me how it is that you have done what you have done tonight. I would never have asked it of you, for it would have been then that I did not respect you.' 'The first time,' he answered, 'I was very unhappy—there was, how you say? 'dolor'—but now I think that there can be no pleasure in all life more great': each of his words weighed carefully on his scales of honesty and gravity.

'Marcos,' I said, 'there are some things which are so dirty because of the spirit in which they are done. I thank you, and I will always thank you, that you have shown me what is the opposite of this. To make love without tenderness is as nothing.'

'Please, what is 'tenderness?' he asked. 'Compassion' he understood. 'Si,' he said.

'Marcos,' I said, 'whenever in my life I think of a Spanish boy, I will always think of you and that he may be as fine as you are. This is important, and I thank you with all my heart.'

'But,' he said, 'it is I who must thank you.'

'Marcos,' I then said: 'what I wish for you most in your life is a good wife and fine children.' All at once my instinct towards his background had told me how I might reach him most deeply; and what I wished him is indeed only what I wish for myself and for all men if they will eventually be complete.

'O' he said, responding to me completely, 'that is what I wish for myself so very, very much in my life . . .' But already we were nearing the club and he had to break off to say more urgently: 'There is my friend waiting! We are late.'

And indeed there was a figure standing ahead, who called out towards us in Spanish.

Firmly Marcos took my hand and looked very steadily into my eyes; and then swiftly he turned and left.

It seemed that he made no response whatsoever to the Spanish vociferations which greeted him and which continued as, side by side, the two figures walked brisk and erect away from me to vanish beyond a bridge over a canal. It was as if, like poor Lorca, he was being marched off to an execution in the very near dawn.

I raised my arm in a lonely salute, but he did not look back.

V

I could not hurry away from the spot but retraced my steps over the moist cobble-stones, beside the tranquil water, beneath the conniving trees, slowly and dazed (no matter how late it was—but this was a city which seemed to defy sleep); until eventually I leant back over one of those many bridges of the lovely water-city and waited for the dawn to break.

The sky already promised such beauty that it would have been sinful, and in such a mood of beatitude towards life, not to honour it.

Silently the early workers passed me on their bicycles in the still-dark stillness, and some of them called back to ask what I did there, leant back against a bridge, digging the dawn, man—and believing that no other city in all the world could offer one more beautiful.

Death was in Venice, not in Amsterdam.

THE ARROW AND THE SONG

H. Longfellow

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where,
For so swiftly it flew, that the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I know not where,
For who has sight so keen and strong
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long, long afterwards in an oak
I found the arrow still unbroke
And the song from beginning to end
I found again in the heart of a friend.