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Autor: Owen, Jason
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Gibraltar may crumble

by JASON OWEN

So this was it: the possibility, which he'd refused over all the tight-rope years to recognise as anything but unreal remote, now having to be faced with self-bitter gall; with his deepest concern for others than himself, and his head held high on a braced neck; strengthening but incalculably ageing the weathering of this private disaster.

He had been remembering the words of an Indian he'd once casually met in the way of his chosen world: 'In my country they don't publish names in the newspapers.' Had he been in London, anonymous enough provincial emigré to the metropolis, he might with luck have passed unnoticed — his name was, after all, not famous enough to attract attention; but it was unusual enough in his home county for all that and more.

He knew—facing as immediately and leaden-rationally as he could the consequences—that there were houses where he could no longer be received. The thresholds were not forbidden him, but the constraint was such, as if the children were being cautioned not to touch him, that to continue the associations would be impossible. The men were tolerant, if not exactly comprehending; but the women would not get over the apparent slight to their complacently over-rated charms. So sexually complexed and sheltered were they that they were only able to look at him as unsavoury, unclean: 'It's no good—I've tried but I just can't understand or forget; and, to be quite frank, I'd prefer that you didn't mix with Gwendoline' (a daughter). That had been one of them. He didn't particularly blame her; that was her code, which he had himself violated by his conduct, once it became public. Another had tried more gamely, but fallen down in the attempt, saddened by her failure. 'I just don't understand,' she had said. 'No, I shouldn't say that; it's not what I mean. But, yes, it is: I don't understand!' As in all such situations, one 'found out who one's real friends were': which perhaps in this instance pointed to nothing more precise than degrees of sophistication. The loyalty of some was never really tested because their maturity of outlook and broadness of experience had already reacted in advance to just such a time when one of their friends or acquaintances might be involved in this way.

But, creature of very conscious kith and kin, there were the sad eyes of his relatives—like the royal family, mainly female—to be faced. Yet, with the loyalty which he might have expected (had he ever thought to look ahead into nightmare), they stood by him, were careful by surreptitious signs of undemonstrative affection to show him that nothing had seriously altered, that their sense of kinship was inviolable. But the sadness which underlay all this was almost unbearably harrowing for him—especially where the older ones at the ends of their lives were concerned (and some were indeed already aged): simple old ladies shut away in their valley towns, they had no inkling that such things fairly commonly went on. All that mattered was that one of their golden boys (perhaps the most golden) had got himself tarnished, and publicly—in a way which couldn't be kept hidden under the family patchwork quilt with a little sweetening pocket of dried lavender.

But for his mother it was more: a disgrace which, within her black-and-white microcosm, was Shakespearean in its proportions; which assailed her with mocking, threatening shadows each time she as much as showed her face outside the doors of her home, in which she now sought almost perpetual shelter. It was a blow which gripped physically and agonisingly the heart, at her age might already be contracting it to its very death.

Alone, one could have lived with this, lost in some large metropolitan world where shoulders are blasély shrugged and sophistication (of a not always entirely wholesome sort) matches the bitters in the 6 o'clock drink. Or, eventually, as a final gesture, the ultimate two-fingers-up to it all, (he wryly thought) one might go away and join a 'drag' show, perform with creditable talent and élan on stage, yet never nevertheless be exactly a jelling member of the gushing troupe away from the foot-lights. But one's point would albeit flamboyantly have been made. So he mused.

It did at least become 'necessary' for him to go away: for himself alone he would, in spite of all his musings, have stayed, even contemptuously (a danger . . .) and faced it—this was, after all, 1965. But he felt the need to remove himself from the ladies; his shadow from their parlours and himself from the unbearable look of their simple but uncomprehending compassion and the dead hurt in his mother's eyes.

And his job? In a provincial city such as this, conventional tolerance could not, would not, be over-stretched: it didn't fit in with golf clubs and rotary tables, was bound to end in quasi-apologetic regret following the question posed in the club-room. 'What's this I hear about that assistant of yours, old man? Hm, I wouldn't have thought he was one of those. Always seemed manly enough to me—although, come to think of it, he was a bit 'arty' once or twice. Don't hold with that sort of thing myself. Used to come across it at school, of course. But a chap should get over that, and if he can't control himself . . . 18 holes now and again—o, I say, nothing intended by that! a bit of a clanger, what!—would do him good; and go up to 'town' now and again for a really good pro. Or there are some willing enough pieces behind some of the bars even in this town . . .'

'And so, Gerald, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to look for something somewhere else. Don't rush; take your time, but . . . I'm very sorry.'

He wondered if his chairman remembered now the bantering exchange at the company dinner the very night it had happened . . .

'I haven't a criminal record, you know, sir!' he had said over the brandy and the cigars (what on earth had the context been?); but thinking (and how well he remembered thinking it) at any rate, not yet—but if I go on the way I am and if the laws of the land remain as they are . . .' But only really relishing, indulgently, remotely, the irony: now it seemed as if that balloon, in which he had been gently swirling the amber liquid, and gazing into it as he swirled, had been a crystal ball of warning . . .

*

It had been a high, clear early-autumn night, bland with the warmth of the summer not yet left completely behind; and he had felt elated

after the alcohol and even after the occasion (these functions are seldom quite as bad as one uneagerly fears). He was glad that his car was parked on the other side of the city's centre. He felt like a walk under the high stars and the pale moon, felt like expanding his chest up towards them as he considered self-benignly that he really wasn't doing too badly, that he was finding adequate self-expression in his work and that he was obviously well-liked where it mattered, in a way which made his future seem very assured. The ribs at his not yet being married or at his self-exclusion from the social collections of complacent, 'respectable' coteries of dullest middle-aged establishment had no real edge to them or under-current of suspicion. And generally he was pretty careful: he'd never in his 20s enjoyed the risks and near-shaves which had only seemed to whet the appetites of others; and now, when he had scrupulously to maintain a developing public persona, they would have been nothing but a crazy, ill-disciplined self-indulgence. There was always the outlet of London for the monthly weekend (when generally he was 'successful'); there were the holidays abroad (nowadays, with most of his good butties—and there had been some good ones—all well tied-up in marriage, mainly and conveniently solo). Yes, he did himself well enough; and his chest stretched up towards the moon and stars, seeking also their congratulation.

But that very night . . .

He had called in that urinal, the one tucked away beneath the bridge carrying the main line, merely to get rid of some of that buoying-up brandy; but, immediately he was inside, he had become aware, in the chill but alluring light of the moon, of the young man a stall or so from him, who was indeed only too eager that he should become aware of him. And he too became quickly and healthily eager . . . In their fever of subsequent contact he and the young man had temporarily removed danger from their consciousness; until the realisation cruelly penetrated that a flashlight was supplementing the light of the mocking moon—and that there could be no escape now. All was too obvious for there to have been any point in attempted bluff. And the thought of running for it was only momentary, although the other lad did try, both of them suddenly hating each other in their sick, blanched distress . . .

'I'm sorry,' he had said lamely, after they had at last emerged from the gruelling interrogation and statement at the nearest police-station (just over the frontier into dockland) leading to the preferred charge for immediate hearing the next morning. 'Too late now, isn't it,' said the other one wryly, in his middle twenties about six or so years younger than Gerald, whose evening clothes were lending him a false gloss of sophistication, which couldn't have helped him in the eyes of the law, almost certainly registering him as the 'privileged' seducer.

The night was now quite chill, its blandness banished, the moon become a harshly callous glare, the effects of the brandy long ago dispersed, his stomach a knot of tightness, his mouth sour-dry, his eyes burning. He found his way to his car and drove it out of the city in a frozen daze. His sleep, when eventually in the haven of his own familiar bed it came, was fitful, jolted by sudden nightmare emergences from it. But in his awakening moments he found no sympathy for himself: no doors had been forced open, no privacy had been violated, no telephones tapped,

correspondence read, diaries disciphered. He had taken calculatedly—in the second or so which there had been to calculate—a very foolish risk and now merely suffered its consequences: even if the laws of his land were to be changed, 'indecent' in a public place would still be an offence (and who could seriously argue against that?). No, rather than sympathise with himself, he flailed himself without mercy.

Heavy-eyed from lack of sleep, he went, after putting in an appearance at his office, straight to his solicitor friend's—they had been together at university, but Joshua didn't 'know about him' (few of his friends did: he got by without the luxury of confession), didn't even suspect, it seemed. But he was tersely and helpfully to the point—as much as he could be, that is—, accompanied Gerald to the magistrate's court (he had pleaded a sick headache to explain his absence from work, like a man lacking *esprit de corps* by giving in weakly to a hangover which was a corporate experience after the previous night's dinner).

And there it had been basically resolved, without immediate complication: a fine on the spot rather than deferment until the assizes with prolonged risk of imprisonment. He was one of the lucky ones under a system which meted out its punishments for comparable offences so unbalancedly and indiscriminately. But how sorry he felt for his partner in that brief contact of become-squalid lust: haggard and dejected, ill-shaven as expression of his agitation, he seemed shrunk by the weight of the experience. Gerald would dearly have liked to have gone across to talk with him; but he sensed that it was better not to, that the man would only feel revulsion for him.

Instead of lunching at his usual pub, he drove home to the house which he shared with his mother, told her with a gulp and a plunge what others would be reading a few hours later in the evening paper; prepared her for what had to be faced, for what he'd brought her to at the end of her simple, moral, conventional life. And then he went back to his office, played perfunctorily with the papers spread out over his desk, knew that these were the last hours there when he would still be looked at in the image which he had so carefully built up. At 4 o'clock he sought out his chairman; as with his mother, he knew that he could not fairly leave it to the paragraph mid-way down page 3, under whatever lurid headline they found for it. Jeavons had suggested that he might wish immediately to take some leave, but he preferred to carry on and face it, becoming almost as sorry for his uneasy colleagues and the embarrassed typists as he couldn't help occasionally being for himself (one girl was to go crying from his room as she brought his 11 o'clock tea: she was very young, and he must by kindness have excited her earlier admiration). But it had been difficult not to take a certain relish in the situation when he came face to face with a colleague who, only a few weeks before, had recalled with indignant approval the throwing overboard of three suspected homosexuals from a war-time troopship on which he had apparently travelled as a very pure young man in a hammock made of unsplinterable glass. 'You approve of murder, then?' Gerald had asked him. 'What did a few more matter in wartime? Besides, they had it coming to them,' had been spat out as reply, eyes flashing with merciless and so righteous horror. The day before, the same man had justified his hatred of every German be-

cause of the extermination of the Jews. 'But what about a homosexual Jew?' Gerald had then seen fit to ask him, seeing him in his passions as the mean, unintelligently moral little Caesar, worthless himself to society, who would yet, in spite of and perhaps indeed because of his worthlessness, trigger lynchings, launch Ku-klux-klans; who would have been there with the Nazis spitting on the Jews had he been born in their land.

Gerald looked across towards their third-story window and wondered if the man felt an urge to throw him through it.

*

Now all these many social results of his little lapse by moonlight could be tangibly counted, minutely examined, studied in their settled irrevocability. In this he was immersed as he sat in the corner seat of his third-class compartment, facing the engine, en route for London and anonymity, for new, less exalted beginnings and perhaps a total relaxation such as he had never known provincially. All was not lost (almost inevitably he thought in the cliché which the played-out drama seemed to demand): he was too tough—although not too numb to feel still, every time he reflected, stabs of pain quite physical, remembering the eyes he was leaving behind, belonging to those too simple and unsophisticated to live with fact and disillusionment and public opinion and the cracked images on which they had over-based their vulnerably small existences.

Unmartyred, unheroic, merely a bit punctured and considerably sobered, he sat there (able to concentrate now again on articles of *New Statesman* length—an edition lay beside him) and felt a surge of sudden resilience as the engine drawing him forwards gave a bursting shriek of anticipation and defiance as it tore through Reading. The capital was less than three-quarters of an hour away, and probably a half of his life was yet to be lived. He hoped that he was wiser, but somehow he doubted it.

SONNET

Lest you be angry with me I will talk
Of other things: the weather and the gold
Of sunlight littering the garden walk,
The taste of oranges, the bitter cold
Of ale upon the tongue, the majesty
Of redwoods rising in cathedral groves;
The many moods that move the purple sea;
Of ancient maps locating treasure troves.

All these and sundry things I will explore
With wit and learning or with subtle jest.
If there be subjects which would please you more
I shall be pleased to honor your request
In manly tones . . . or softly as a dove—
No matter how I speak, I speak of love!

Jim Ramp