



The Dreams Of Strangers

It was one of those marvellous days of an English Spring when no clouds obscure the blue of the sky and a cooling breeze followed the sea-waves inshore. I was sitting – as often these days, alone – on the sand, indulgently lamenting the now long-gone days of love and youth.

The beach – despite the middle morning hour, and the sunful warmth – was denuded of humans, save for two young women walking their dogs; the women chatting amiably, while their dogs chased each other in that friendly manner dogs sometimes exhibit toward their own domestic kind, occasionally running to splash happily about in the sea whose tide, just past its highest, was now turning.

It was a pleasant – perhaps a very English – scene, and this Monday was, at it proved, no or little different from the many others which had found me there on such sunful, warmish, days. For I had occasioned upon this quietful spot toward the end of the busy tourist season, last year, and quite often came to sit here on subsequent holidays – a man of sixty years, whose greying hair, Tweed jacket, flat cap, corduroy trousers, and well-polished if worn boots, proclaimed him to be a somewhat old-fashioned, possibly eccentric, but nevertheless harmless Englishman.

It had not always been so, in the years and decades past, when death, killing, hatred, and violence, had been my chosen and most constant companions. But now I could be and was just that: an ageing man sat, peacefully, by the dunes at the almost farthest end of the bay of an English seaside town.

To my left, and nearby, a craggy treeless sea-surrounded Down. To my right, and almost a quarter of a mile distant, the small seaside town itself, home now to a motley multitudinousness construction crew whose garish fluorescent jackets, white protective hats, noisey machinery and machines, proclaimed them to be some alien invading army from another world.

Their excuse – for their continuing occupation and intrusive noise – was that of constructing some new-fangled sea-defences, and, like all occupying armies, they were both resented and welcomed. For some, they brought new business, their shekels most readily accepted; for others, they were but something of a pest, to be stoically endured in that very English way, much as we endured our bleak, at times depressing, climate – keeping alive our hopes by remembering days of warmful seaside Sun such as this.

For myself, I had longed for them to finish and to depart, so that peace – the quietude of sea, sand, and breeze – might once again descend upon locations such as this. But for now, they were there – and this was the only nearby place by the sea still currently free from their machinations and their noise, enabling me to thus liberate, if only briefly, the dreams of strangers, waiting, so patiently, within.

1

But just where – how – to begin this brief recalling of those many strangers who over five decades have been me or who have visited, and stayed awhile while I lived with, and sometimes learnt from, them?

Begin the story somewhere, for us [1]. Begin perchance with the happy childhood years in East Africa and the Far East, with their memories of bathing in a river a short walk from our home in Africa, of swimming out from a beach into the warm South China Sea? Or begin of going alone on a Saturday morning into that Singapore city of the middle nineteen sixties (a very different place from that city, now) where I would walk down a street past the Capitol cinema, and an eating place where one could get steak and chips, to meet with a group of young Chinese men who, as I, were learning a specific Martial Art?

Or, perhaps, begin with the two years in the sixth form, at a place where I was one of only around a dozen seven-days boarders, with memories of the innocent joy of undertaking some new experiment in Physics when I felt world upon world opening up before me through such scientific understanding as I had begun to experience, and where – even then – I betook myself ever closer to the deepest, most dark, Abyss of all because I felt I wanted to know, to experience, everything...

Or, perhaps, begin, with the story of that first, fragile, tentative, naive love that seeped out from me, unexpected and it seemed then almost uncontrollably, one hot very Sunful Summer during the school holidays after only a week of picking strawberries with a gaggle of mostly older women, one of whom in the following week taught me much about my body and her own.

Or, perhaps, begin with the year – my only full year – at University where all my friends, save one, were gay because I enjoyed their company, finding in them a sensitivity, an appreciation and knowledge of culture, that the other often posturing and ill-mannered young men around me seemed so much to lack?

Or, perhaps, to – and rightly – begin with the over two years of ultra-violence, political extremism, and small-time racketeering, in a city in the north of England, and which years would take me in and out of courtrooms again and again until prison cells claimed me several times to finally bring that day when I walked away, a free man, from the gates of one such prison to sit, that early morning, in sunshine by the side of a road wondering which way to go, and wandering, wandering, for months as a tramp until the life of a Catholic monk sneaked up upon me, slowly cunningly, to claim both my *ψυχή* and my soul... [2]

Or, perhaps, and morally, fast forward to begin with events only a few years ago, now, when she whom I so deeply loved took, in her despair, her own life after I had so selfishly taken myself away to stay again for a few days, only a few days, at the Farm, the fields, my home, that I also loved and despite her pleas for me to stay, to be, with her...

And yet were these – these so many strangers, now, and those so few old friends – really me? For they are, it seems, now only as dreams insubstantially remembered in the minutes past awakening, when as today one looks out from a friend's bedroom to see the mature Cherry tree quite full in glorious wondrous bloom; awake to smell the freshness of the early morning air when the Sun has yet to rise into the growing brightness of the clear April sky, and one smiles as her neighbour's cat cheekily but so gracefully walks the so narrow top of the garden fence to find that usual useful spot warmed by the first rays of a risen Sun.

For what seems real now – only real, now – are the memories, the sights, of only days ago. What seems important now, only now, is the person I have, apparently, become, melded from some strange quixotic alchemical mix of *personae* and that living of over five decades past: grown from the feeling, the acceptance, of mistakes made, of errors understood, of suffering caused and happiness recalled.

What has grown, slowly, so painfully slowly, then from that mix? Only the knowing of love – and of our human need for stillness, which stillness can sometimes be presented in such numinous culture as can remind us of our fragility, our folly, and how so very quickly we in our hubris can forget our errors, mistakes, and how easily we can lie to, and deceive, and make excuses for, and cheat, others and ourselves.

For there is importance, an overriding importance, in a personal mutual love – for therein is presented and can be presented the numinous, the divine, our very humanity – beyond and devoid of all abstractions, all dogma, all organization, and beyond all faith and all vainglorious selfish hopes.

For there is a need for us to be still, accepting, peaceful within ourselves, within the limits the bounds, set by both empathy and honour. A stillness arising, growing, when we cease to strive after abstractions, cease to judge by some human-manufactured standard; when we cease to be troubled by a lack, known or felt, within us; when we become as we truly are: one life, one microcosmic mortal connexion to Earth's past and future, one who is simply passing-by and who but briefly lives, not in the abstract causal fast time we have manufactured for ourselves, but instead in the living, numinous, much slower Time of Nature and the Cosmos. Where there is *wu-wei*, *φύσις*, to name but three...

2

In the past few weeks, following much self-indulgent musing on my own mortality, I seem to have acquired a somewhat strange, and occasionally embarrassing, habit – of suddenly, unexpectedly, being so overwhelmed by something, some event, some chance encounter, some sight, some sound, some scent, some woman, so that I often find myself quite tearful; sometimes to such an extent that tears fall, slowly, or occasionally even stormily, from my eyes, falling or dripping down unbidden to wet my beard and face.

It was thus, only around a week or so ago, when I on holiday ventured into the centre of some seaside town. There was a young man playing the accordion, quite well. (I had forgotten how lovely an accordion, played well, can sound.) So I sat in the warm Sun under another clear blue sky, to listen, as people passed. Perhaps it was the rather sadful music, which sounded – at least to me – somewhat Slavonic, as indeed the man himself appeared to be. And yes, I did give him some money, no wine for me that day...

Perhaps it was the slim Cherry trees, coming into bloom, that lined one side of this small, park-like, enclave on one of whose benches I had sat. Perhaps it was the music – provoking some memories, of some time, somewhere; perhaps it was the young, quite pretty woman, who so quickly and so unnoticeable of me passed me by but whose scent assailed me. Perhaps it was all – and more – of these and other such things which combined to form within me one moment, one passing moment, of a numinous, living apprehension where I became more than just one human being, seated in some town on some day in *Oster-monath*.

Whatever, it just *was*; and so beckoned me to unwillingly cry as if I in that one moment, that one numinous moment, had become all the shadows, all the strangers, all the sorrow, all the joys, all the happiness, all the remorse, all the errors, all the wistful promise, of my past – and of the past of so many other humans, century piling upon century, war-killed corpses piling upon war-killed corpses.

It was thus, on that same day, when no longer tearful I found myself relaxing in the still fine weather on the beach where people crowded, often noisy and quite nearby.

A year ago, or more, this would have somehow in some way annoyed or even angered me – this proximity of people; this manifestation, in noise, of their life, their families. So much so that I would have gone elsewhere, seeking to be alone; seeking some quiet place, to dwell inward upon myself in such selfishness as perhaps marked me. But now – now it is so very different.

For now I can sit or walk or traverse among such thronging people, quite happy, quite content, quietly peaceful within myself. As when on that day I sat among families on the beach – children laughing, playing. Young men and young women, sharing, alive with their still burgeoning hopes. There – two young children, both girls, with their mother and father; the father with a dog – throwing a ball into the sea for the dog to fetch, forgetting the dog was still on its lead. So the dog ran, where the tide gently ebbed upon sand, the lead stretched, and the father fell into the sea, to much loud good-natured amusement from his children and his partner/wife. Even he himself laughed. Such a simple human pleasure, a simple joy, so simply shared.

There was such humanity – such real humanity – there, in that moment, and all I could do was smile, alone, to myself, and turn my face away lest someone saw such tears.

No war here, imposed by some government. No abstract ideology, no abstract cause or duty to lie, cheat, fight, and die for. Only this, of that: fragile mortal humans bound by the natural sanctity, the divinity, of love. There, only there, was perhaps the only cause sufficient to love, to fight, even die for: those that one knew, loved, shared, cared for and grew with, moment to moment, day following day.

Such human closeness with others unknown no longer thus detracts or even begins to annoy me. Not even the speedboat which was surged out from the harbour slipway above where I – my pottering-resumed – walked, could distract or annoy, for it was only what it was; only one small and passing microcosmic manifestation that no longer had any power to break the peaceful silence that somehow in some way had come to dwell within me, brought, gifted, by so many strangers.

So I just smiled, walking on to where I could sit again to wait and watch, one human being among many and perhaps to others just one man of greying hair inanely smiling.

3

There is, cannot yet be, any conclusion – only the flickering of one more brief mortal life upon one planet which its dwellers have named Earth. Only one more connexion between a present, a future, and some pasts. One one more nexion, so gently opening so that one *ψυχή* may, perhaps, pass beyond one type of Time to another. Only one more human-being hoping, perhaps beyond hope, that some words, some act, some writing of his may one day somewhere cause some numinous resonance, some memory, some remembering, in some other living sentient being, provoking, bringing, thus some change, some evolution, however small, for the better...

One stranger writing to another.

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Notes:

[1] τῶν ἀμόθεν γε, θεά, θύγατερ Διός, εἰπέ καὶ ἡμῖν (Homer, *Odyssey*, 10) "So you, my goddess – daughter of Zeus – begin the story somewhere, for us."

[2] *ψυχή* is now commonly regarded as a synonym for *soul*, a somewhat prevalent error which, in my view, a student of *Studia Humanitatis* would probably not make: qv. its usage in Homer, Aeschylus, Aristotle, *etcetera*.