

LET THOSE THAT HAVE EARS



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Let Those That Have Ears

Remember I was older. If I fed
her some advice or praise it never led
to more than what an acolyte should know
who sees, and far above her, some pure light
transcending everything, whose shadows grow
the more encompassing because of height.
I cannot say quite what I mean, but all
who heard her happiness were from that time
entrapped in it, lost and had the sound
of their own pieces muted into mime
beside what pulled the roots up from the ground.
If there is magic in the world, that world awoke
to storms that wept with her, and rocks that broke.

All heard, within themselves and not by choice,
a woman's urgent, soft and swelling voice
express with tenderness a life betrayed
in scorching arias and then that long
diminishment with which our griefs are stayed
into an ever-sad but stabbing after-song
that shapes the contours of this world we know.
And this is what I looked for, why I sung
in choirs and amateur recording groups,
and was quite popular and joined, or hung
about, in various well-known acting troupes.
Not full professional, that I couldn't claim,
but of a decent standard all the same.

How I earned by living, my daytime life, of course was different. I had a wife and two adoring children, with a house down Bromley way, suburban but detached with apple trees and garden that my spouse gave endless hours to, and indeed had hatched as part of our extended lifetime plan. If all else fail we should be independent, self-supporting, knowing happiness we had was wholly owing to that commonwealth of skills about the well-intentioned dad. All families are happy in their several ways as I was, certainly, in those first days.

I need to stress how settled, dull and plain my circumstances were, and would remain so, ever, if I'd had my way. I'm not some master of the universe, no more-than-high-placed roller piling chips he'd got to cloud-topped altitudes not seen before, but slight, convivial, with a happy grin most times: a small boy's freckled face with hair that flops about, who wears a cardigan, slack-sleeved in pubs, indeed most anywhere with green-check shirt and tie-less if he can. You've seen my type a thousand times in scenes from Country Life or motoring magazines.

5. Safe, dependable, what women like,
the rep or local preacher on his bike,
who buys his round and promptly tells a joke
half-waggishly and grins, and by design
forgets the ladies present, goes for broke
but stops, belatedly observes the line.
A man of fundamental decencies
who's first to step out given accidents
and run a neighbour to Emergencies.
The quiet Englishman with commonsense
who promptly does what's needed, glad to please,
and go the long way round for anyone
on life's hard Calvary we cannot shun.

But rare enchantment started from the air
when we two sung together and would pare
the hard rind off the hackneyed arias
and show the palpitating inner heart —
which vocal interchange both needs and has,
or had in our case, always, part to part,
entrancing each of us, completely. Back
and practising at her piano, we
would hardly notice the accompaniment
as each to each across eternity
would link our arms to what the music meant.
Her breath and softness I would feel around
me long, long afterwards, and filled with sound.

It is the voice of angels that we hear
most faint, most distantly, and yet still near.
A sound as human and as much remote
from this poor flesh of ours as we must rein
in sweetness on the syllables our throat
will pour out passionately with all their pain
in forms that hold us to their inmost heart,
which we remember in some childhood grace
that we were happy in, some golden hour
among our comrades or some seaside place,
no doubt imagined even, but with power
to coalesce or recollect around
the heights, as I have said, that presence found.

The noise of traffic and the steely hum
as customers in pubs and restaurants come
and go, and pass the time of day with those
who have no more perhaps than them to say
is still a sound that's comforting, a prose
that underwrites the small things of the day.
The chink of glasses, click of door that closes,
mechanical, dull roar on building sites,
the birds that sing unnoticed, a dog that barks,
the shopping talk of quiet suburbanites,
grey Friday evenings, with the fret that marks
a dull week ending and the office done
with — take us on that humdrum homeward run.

But from my other life what did I seek?
Excitement, maybe, and some easy speak
on thoughts prohibited in daily care.
We stood in row on row and you could feel
your voice in concert with that common air,
half lost in it, but with a force that's real
and intimate to all the singers there.
Besides, my City life was fearfully dull:
adjustment rates and settlements and claim,
the work on spreadsheets and the hours to mull
on actuary reports: they're all the same —
abstruse statistics that, in listing, prove
a carelessness in lives at some remove.

10. And so to Jennifer. What can I say
of someone lighting up the steep of day,
who won the hearts of all, where even girls
adopted gestures or the clothes she wore?
A shaded innocence with scattered curls
that framed the bluest eyes you ever saw,
and all so modestly and with a voice
to call the holy angels from their rest:
fresh and warm and clear, with open notes
that had a conscience in them, richly blest
with inner strengths on which the studio dotes:
a fine integrity in phrasing which
once heard must draw us closer and bewitch.

Little comes to us, of course, as Heaven-sent
and if perhaps we weren't so innocent
I'd say that neither of us made a plan
or saw beyond a friendship simply going on
from week to week as only such things can
without our counting what was risked or gone,
and kept that way no doubt. That's true: there were
no awkward silences or things to hide
from kids and Margaret, and hone with lies.
If naught to do with that more private side,
it linked in what we held to otherwise:
in thought, in observations, each event,
we were two bodies in one person blent.

If those of Jennifer were out of sight,
in other women or in dreams at night,
we still were sensible and warm together,
and what she'd say to me would often speak
of what I'd say to her. Curious but whether
she or I first noticed it, for week on week
we carried on without acknowledgement.
Perhaps the tongues were wagging: I do not know.
We simply congregated after class
and walked back slowly chatting, or we'd go
to have a coffee somewhere, drink or pass
an hour or two in some such place:
a shy, half-adolescent state of grace.

It seemed to her perhaps, or did to me,
that mentioning it would kill the thought or see
all kinds of awkwardness and guilt intrude.
Why should we anyway, when we had done
no more than make some pleasant interlude
among successes that our lives had won
in other ways? She was a teacher at
a local school, a good one I'd have thought
who made kids be themselves, be strong, confess
to usual mischiefs, where I'd often caught
a wish to help them further and impress
the needs of others with a kindness
returned so often in our happiness.

Beware of happiness, beware the claim
that further annexations are the same
as adding one to one to make the two.
We are as we become; the lives we lend
are made with others always, not plain you
and me. It is an abstruse, changing blend
of body chemistry and confidence,
and all we hope for in some future form
is built of incidents we felt before:
prospects vague, no doubt, but safe and warm
where we are just ourselves but even more.
A dream of going on with some blessed power
to build on our imaginings from hour to hour.

15. So through those features we were one together
as much the sun is in the hot June weather,
and in the swelling breast and tucked-in waist
I felt my own more straightened features
enclose her gestures, walking with the trace
of laughter brightening into God's own creatures,
blessed as we blessed others. In her face,
and smiling eyes and mouth there grew the more
importunate her breath as days flowed through.
My body leant to that, and felt its draw.
So what she had, I held, and ever knew
in walking out with her, the breath's soft rise
around me waking to a thousand eyes.

If sin is in intention, carnal thought,
then truly we were never of that sort.
Long months together easy with each other:
friends, a little more perhaps, but each
not keen, I know, to pass that state to lover,
and would have stayed beyond temptation's reach
upon that tranquil shore of happiness
if kids and Margaret hadn't been away
that week with in-laws in their Gloucester flat.
A simple kindness had her let me stay
a day or two, cook meals: no more than that.
You'll smile that such a mundane, chance event
could hold such power to err in and repent.

Well, there we are: the moth will court the flame,
and man with woman too is much the same.
With all those promises so wisely said
and circumspect provisions that we make
are pollen on the anthers, soon as shed
when wind will make the lifted lily shake.
An aria had put us much at risk: she sat
and picked the notes out on the small piano
and sang, and I sang back, and so much yearned —
Elvira she, I don Giovanni —
that had the angels in high heaven burned
eternities in hell they would have come
to drink the breaths as we did, and succumb.

We both were glad and sorry from the first
as though some out-of-reach, gross abscess burst
and poured its tender poison through the veins
whose very sweetness sears and shames
as dye from stood-in-water roses stains
the curling petals and ignites their flames.
Something raw, then, fierce and enigmatic
that deepened into aching tenderness,
when what was on the outside and around
us slow withdrew into some shared excess
of happiness, when what was empty sound
became the music of that longed-for place
and part of her soft, sylvan, startled grace.

I cannot tell you how that body felt,
exhausted over me, the sweetened melt
of all our boundaries in that body's weight:
the press of limbs, that overflowing cup
of reckless probing, which, if profligate,
must deal in breath and give the body up.
And all the time as crucified, that cross
we're nailed to in our waking time, I walked
as one still burdened with my normal life,
a glorious flower-head now single-stalked,
in tube train travelling, the kids and wife.
She hung about me, soft, as though to wreath
her limbs so close that I could hardly breathe.

20. Not strung between the two: that world was one,
and all I touched, or ate, or heard was spun
of scents in consort that extended out
into an ever-changing tangled tide
of home, the office, in the shops about —
and deep and suffocating, still inside —
the surf of us together, and a voice
that slackened sinews and undid my bones,
and touched my fingertips with heightened flame.
It roistered in the air: the trees and stones,
the breeze that cooled my cheek was more the same:
one vast, unmitigated, breathing whole
consumed my body and, much more, my soul.

Increasingly I did my chores by rote,
at work distracted and was kept afloat
by Henny, my good secretary, and
of course the routine of it, steady load
in old appraisals and of meetings planned
ahead, but absent-mindedness still showed.
Are you all right, old boy? they'd say. I was
and wasn't. I was happy, inward blessed
with strange contentment, and would talk for hours
on this and anything, saw women dressed
as nature had intended, drank their powers
of body in, and smiled: at one with them
and all the joys of life from which they stem.

Bromley: London's outer suburbs mean
respectability, that all be seen
as prosperous, law-abiding, well-behaved.
We were: the house fresh-painted, garden care
showed roses pruned, lawns mowed, and path neat-paved.
The base to summer's heady-perfumed air
said all was comfortable and no dark sins
were locked in basement or behind the door.
If man can live in fellowship with man
and meet his problems on a common floor
of comradeship and enterprise, the span
of three millennia of township life
are summarized in kid and car and wife.

The world is quite enough consumed by cares
for me to champion more wild affairs.
The marriage bond is sacred, and what is wrong
will be exacerbated more than solved.
And then that brief-snatched joy before too long
redounds on families and all involved.
I know the arguments, and they are true,
as much as anything can be on earth.
Margaret and I were happy, immensely so,
and little bonds that held us had their birth
in spats and disagreements that would grow
much like the pearl in oyster: shining calm
enveloping the tiny grain of harm.

Happy in two worlds where each allows
a consummation of our wedding vows.
And they were real to me, that sense of sin
our padre often spoke of locked behind
whatever innocence or feast was in.
Good Catholics both, we ever kept in mind
the glittering serpent with its subtle tongue.
Of course there were temptations, and I saw
myself as sometimes walking out with both:
Jennifer on one side, Margaret more
composed, reminding us of marriage oath.
But all, as I have said, mere fantasy
but acted out in English decency.

25. Yet all the same a time of sudden wealth
in personal happiness, the body's self.
I saw my legs stride out, and Jennifer's
and Margaret's tandem-wise, the legs' long stride
was from the hips indubitably hers
and hers. A strange sensation that I tried
imagining at times, we three together.
The one companionable and comfortable
that held no secrets from me, warm and close.
The other vital, vigorous and full
of happiness held in by tailored clothes —
when in their different ways they both were mine
to wonder at, to hold to, and combine.

Set back and prosperous, our Bromley place
was quietly added to, and you could trace
the small improvements nurtured year by year:
the fence extended in a bay-tree frieze,
the second garage and the outside tier
of palings, fountain, and short row of trees.
Here you would have said were people happy
and so we were, of course, with civic sense
to serve on charities and play our part
in local raffle drives and church events.
Whatever you may say, these passions start
in shared opinions, mutual give and take
where all we did was for the other's sake.

Of course I travelled, constantly on call
to northern Europe, Denmark most of all,
but Austria I liked the best, Bavaria too:
good-hearted people and their homely fare
of sausages and beer and dumpling stew.
I felt at home, was always welcome there
whatever place I went. I tried their concerts,
galleries, and got to know the high Baroque
in church and monasteries and regencies,
but more than that, beyond its usual stock
of saints, I liked the sober decencies
of white Rococo, where the sound could sail
as mote in sunlight with a glimmering trail.

So there I was in Frankfurt, brokering
the last transactions, tying up the usual things,
in haste for once, and, if the truth be told,
got somewhat muddled up with dividends
and payables, the fault of some vile cold
that made life miserable at both my ends,
but pressing on, and had to, much too busy
to take time off. It shifted to my ear,
the left initially and then the right,
and got so bad at last I couldn't hear
but wound up all the meetings, took my flight
straight back to Blighty and the local doc
who thought I'd put my prospects into hoc.

Steroids, injections, scans: I had the lot
and wasn't too concerned at what I'd got:
a nasty ear infection that would pass.
The doctor nodded. *We can up the dose
a bit*, he said as adding to the farce
I wasn't privy to, or much too close.
So what is it? I said at last. *Sudden
neurosensory hearing loss*, he said,
in both ears sadly, which is rather rare.
But temporary? He grimaced, scratched his head.
*And they'll be other things before we're there.
Tinnitus, and balance may be shot
or at least precarious, as like as not.*

30. I wasn't deaf, completely so, but heard
the speech around me thin and slurred,
as in some tinny, ill-adjusted speaker where
the turned-up volume makes distorted sound,
except that it was distant, and had an air
of being here and nowhere, all around.
It blared as much as any sound can blare
that seems from elsewhere, filtered through a veil
of static, hissing, harsh cacophony
that rose and fell, a penetrating wail
that never left the airwaves wholly free.
Always above or in my head was rooming
hell's punishment in dark and steady booming.

So slowly, most reluctantly I went
to my confession, more the malcontent
than grieving sinner. Still, I sat there by
the altar steps and took my turn and thought
how much I should confess and not deny.
Much, much could be said. I was the sort
to put his hand up, and for Jennifer
say all and anything. I saw her still,
those sudden, generous tears when I explained:
We still have us, she said, and always will.
I nodded, looked away, the smiling strained,
but telling her as well that this was it,
and irretrievably, if bit by bit.

I made clean breast of it, and bowed my head.
*My son, our white-haired old confessor said,
our Lord is not vindictive, does not set
gross penalties for what we may have done,
nor does he load on necks eternal debt
against the joyful conquests faith has won.
Be strong; give up this woman; make your peace
and take the ailments this poor body gives.
The pains and torments of this world will fade.
Your Saviour waits your turning back. He lives
in that great kingdom where all sin is paid,
to which, if slowly, we must make our way,
for that most precious and eternal day.*

I took the words and quietly walked on out
to sunlight, of our Saviour's, all about.
I saw the leaves lift off the trees, felt air
against my cheek, watched traffic speed
noiselessly to its own ends. No heed
it paid to me, nor should have done. The world
was close to me, of course, but also strange
and all that torment of the howling air
was no way foreign, and would no more change
than lungs their breathing or our head its hair,
yet still it whistled on, as though to press
me harder for the one-time happiness.

Our life is what we make of it, and seems
as much compounded of those inner streams
of hope and devilment that turn away
from eye's containment to our memories —
a source that wavers, changes, does not stay
as even loved or hateful entities
of characters will make us this or that.
Relentlessly the dial speeds on, and where
it stops an instant is the thing we are.
For all the world is but a winding stair
to something wilder, onward, on a par
with orbits of the stars for which our laws
can write equations for but find no cause.

35. Except that God has willed it so, and moves
beyond those thin abstractions science proves.
The laws we make ourselves, to light and guide
as through the pitfalls of the paths we know:
familiar matters walking side by side
to skirt those chasms where we cannot go
though hearing, all the same, the souls in pain:
a friend with cancer, or a son on drugs,
a younger colleague who has Parkinson's,
some act of madness, inexplicable, that slugs
it out with reason in life's pantheons.
Those short, thin slithers of the light that spread
no further than the cautious steps we tread.

With Jennifer, or any like her, should
I come at last to Dante's evening wood
of ignorance and danger, which has led
to that dark abyss that we know as sin,
and what perhaps the prophets always said
about the sloth and ignorance we wander in,
I know that some things may be wicked in
themselves, both vile and cruel, but what I miss,
as holding, isolating, self-benumbing,
is voice, that Jennifer's, those hours of bliss,
the drench of sweetness and the all-becoming
glimpse of Heaven through that closing door
whole lives are otherwise spent searching for.