

is this how it always was, the helplessness of living double lives of sense? or is it part of what we carry, an exchange of gifts, the one word to redeem our learning? today we both drink water and i praise chance that you are not in pain. although your face shines mellowed bitterness, the mouth still sings, lapsed poet rescued by his craft, while outside lygon hammers its revision. the debt of hours, accumulated manuscripts, unending tasks: our flesh too late for healing. 'what is there left to say'. we part in silence rebellious to the code. i see your cunning wave as you marshal our uprising, shared blood forever native.

GEOFFREY BEWLEY

THE NEXT PRIME MINISTER BUT THREE

We were all sitting on the flat's balcony in the evening, smoking, looking at Singapore's skyscraper towers, big blocks of light patterns under the black sky. Mark had just come down from Bangkok by way of Penang, and he was telling us about it.

He said, the Malaysians gave me the wrong stamp at the border, just a three-day stamp to get me right down to Singapore. I'd already been in Penang four days when I saw it. Then I went to Immigration, but they said I'd have to leave, I'd have to get out within another three days. So then I had to go straight out and get a ticket on the bus to Singapore, the day after next. Two more nights in Penang, and I'd get down with half a day to spare.

I was sharing a room in this Chinese hotel with some Danish guys, and when I went back they were just going out for a meal with these Swiss girls from next door. They were going to this good chinese place round the corner. So I went too, and that was really how it started.

The restaurant was about half full with people we knew already. There were some Australians and French, some Americans, there was this huge blond guy like a weightlifter, and there was a big girl with glasses in a long dress. And there wasn't enough room, something like that, so we all sat round two big tables pulled together. I wanted to sit next to one of the Swiss girls, but I ended up between the French couple and the girl with glasses.

They were talking French and she was talking to the big blond guy, so I was a bit out of it. But the big guy wasn't saying much, he was just eating, so then she turned round and started talking to me. We started talking about the chicken rice, and we went on from there. She'd just come from Phuket, and she was staying in the same place as me, as the rest of us. Now she was waiting for a flight across to Sumatra, to Lake Toba, so we were both in Penang just for a day or two.

One of us said to Mark, she was the one you got on to, was she?

Mark said, it was more like she got on to me. But I wasn't thinking about that just then. She was just somebody to talk to. She was quite intelligent. She wasn't bad looking, in a big sort of way. But I don't think it even crossed my mind at that stage.

Anyway, I asked her if she was from Canada, because I could just pick the accent. She said she was from Vancouver. She said her name was Alouette Poirier, and it meant little bird pear-tree. I said that sounded more like a Quebecer, but she said it was just because her parents liked the sound of it.

I forget what else we said. We were just eating, mainly. She said she was really piling on the pounds, Alouette Pearshape. I said that was okay because most women tried to lose weight too much, and it just made them bitchy. And anyway, then we had coffee, and we all went for a walk up Chulia Street to the main road.

We were all splitting off for drinks and things, and I stuck with her, because I was starting to think more about her by then. And then we were sitting at this little table, drinking Cokes, she had the light on her face and shoulders, and then she looked up and looked at me in this sort of way.

One of us asked, what sort of way?

Mark said, well, you know, this wide-eyed sort of way. As if she'd just woken up, and something in her head had just turned my way.

Anyhow, we were going back to the place then, and she asked me which room I was in, and I told her about sharing with the Danes, five dollars each.

She said, well, I'm in this room now with a German girl, for eight dollars. But she's leaving tomorrow, and I was wondering if I could get somebody else to share it, because that'd save four dollars.

I said, if I moved in, that'd save me a dollar.

She said, well, you know, every little helps.

On the balcony then, we all laughed at that. One of us said, save a dollar, wow. That's what, fifty cents? That's big money, man.

Somebody else said, every little bit, yeah.

Mark said, well, what would you do? So anyway, I said, okay, sure, see you in the morning. So we went up and she showed me her room on the middle floor, and then she gave me a big kiss goodnight. It was a great kiss. She pushed me right back against the wall. She was a big girl, she was nearly as tall as me and a lot heavier. It was like she didn't want to stop.

But anyway. Anyway, then we stopped and I went on up, and I had a shower. No, don't laugh, it's hot in Penang.

One of us said, she just threw herself at you, just like that?

Mark said, she nearly knocked me flat. She was a big girl. You know, when you're on your own, you expect these things to happen. But then it always takes you by surprise when it does happen.

Anyway, in the morning I looked for Alouette at breakfast, but she wasn't there. Then I had to go and see Immigration and get my passport, so I did that. Then I came back and looked for her, and she still wasn't around. I knocked at her room but she wasn't in. I'd just started to wonder if it wasn't some sort of joke, if she was really going to turn up at all, but then she just came in from the street. She'd been out to the airport to see the German girl off.

So we saw the Chinese manager, and Alouette said the German girl had gone and now I was going to be moving in instead. He just said, no problem. He was a man of the world. So I took my things down, and then that afternoon we went out with the Swiss girls to see the big Chinese pagoda. That wasn't bad, actually. Lots of Buddhas, big turtles, great view from the top. The Swiss girls took a lot of photos. Then they went back to the hotel, and Alouette and I stopped off at one of those Indian restaurants in the town, and Alouette had another big feed.

Then we went back to the room. It was a fairly small room with a little window at the top, and two beds right together, because there was no other way they could go. Then there was just room for a table and a chair, and our packs on the table. It really was small, actually.

Anyway, she wanted to see my big map. She wanted to see Sumatra, because all she had was the little map in the guide book. I had one of the good big folding ones, Bartholomews. So she folded it out on the bed and lay down to look at it, and I sat down next to her where I could see it. Then we were talking about it, about the roads, and all of a sudden she was rubbing her foot against my leg. She was still talking, but she was rubbing, and then it just went on from there.

One of us asked, what went on?

Mark said, well, what do you think? Do you want a blow by blow story?

Another one of us said, yeah, all the details.

Mark said, all the details. Okay, well, I'll give you some of the details. Well. Well, to start with, she was very, um, determined about it. I'd almost say she was aggressive. She practically picked me up and threw me around. I mean, she was a big girl. She was quite fat, but not just fat, lots of muscle under it. Powerfully built, let's say.

But, I mean, I wasn't objecting to any of this, and I started to respond, and then we both got right into it. I'll tell you what, there certainly was a lot of her. Big boobs, big round bum, big thighs. There was no way she was going to win a Miss Universe prize. But she had a nice face, she was intelligent and she was interested, so, you know, I liked her. I was thinking we'd have a bit of fun, a bit of exercise, making each other feel good.

So, anyway, we did this and we did that. No, I'm not telling you all that stuff. You can figure it out for yourselves. Okay, well, she had me there and she gave me a hum job. Do you know what a hum job is? Well, it's not bad. It's not bad. And then when I got her going, you could have heard her yelling on the next floor. When she kicked out she actually made the bed jump. She was telling me do this, do that, and I just followed instructions. We were both enjoying it. The women I can't take are the ones who just lie like a log while you do all the work. She wasn't like that, anyway. She was really pretty good.

Anyway, in the end she was ready for a poke, and then it turned out I could hardly get into her. She was too fat down there, it was too far back or something. But she'd had that happen before, so she rolled over and I went in from behind. I got hold of her boobs and I was pumping away, and she was bouncing, about fourteen stone of her, the bed was shaking, and then there was another big yell at the finish. We had a good time. She was pretty good.

In the dark on the balcony one of us said, not too many details.

Mark said, yes, well, anyway, just so you'll know. Just broaden your minds a bit. And anyway, after all that, we started talking again. Then she told me more about home in Canada. She said she was an architect, she'd been studying law, and she'd taken this year off for a sabbatical. She'd seen Europe and now she was seeing the East, and then she was going back to get on with her career.

She was telling me she was going for a law career now. She was interested in the law as it affected minority groups, and also as it affected women. She had her glasses on again when she told me that.

I said, women's lib sort of thing.

Alouette said, women's rights would be the better word.

I said, well, you're different from women like that in Australia. You're more interested in guys.

She said, well, there's no rule, it's just how I happen to be.

I asked her if that was really law, or if it was more politics. She said, yeah, it was political after a point. She was getting into politics too. She was in the Liberal Party, which is the radical sort of party in Canada. She was quite serious about it. She talked about Mrs. Gandhi and Mrs. Thatcher. She called her just, Thatcher. She said they'd have a woman Prime Minister in Canada one day.

I said, maybe you.

She said, maybe, yeah, why not?

I remembered this poem at school, somewhere, something about, we had expected you to be, the next Prime Minister but three. Anyway, I told her that.

She said, well, maybe not Prime Minister. But I could see myself as the next Liberal Attorney-General but three. She said that usually went with being the Minister for Social something, which she was also interested in.

I said, well, I wouldn't be surprised if you could handle it.

She said, I can handle most things. I can handle you, for instance.

I thought, well, we could argue a bit about that. But I just said, I see you can, yes.

Then one thing led to another again. I mean, you know, I was there, she was there, neither of us had any clothes on, so why not? It was healthy good exercise. She was pretty good for a feminist. We were changing round, trying new stuff. Once I touched a place where she said she'd never felt anything before. She said, it's a completely new zone.

I said, we'll christen it. We'll call it the Poirier zone.

So we worked on the Poirier zone till it was late and we were tired out. And we tried one last time and I couldn't make it. Then we went out for a shower, which was good fun, and then we gave it away for the night.

We were talking, though, and I asked her about the blond muscle man in the restaurant, and I asked why she'd settled on me.

She said, well, I had the hots for him, but there was just no way I could get through to him, he was just plain dumb. And I was just in the mood for it, and you were there and you looked all right.

I said, what, just like that, that was all there was?

She said, sure, isn't that how a guy feels about it with a woman?

And I thought, well, maybe, but when a guy feels like that he generally finds the woman won't play. If a woman wants it, a guy will generally go along with it, but if a woman wants it a woman won't.

On the balcony most of us nodded. That sounded pretty right.

Mark said, I was thinking of telling her some of this, but it didn't seem like the best time for it. So I just said, I guess so, yeah.

She said, that's the way you felt, wasn't it?

And I thought, well, the whole thing had been her idea. I wouldn't even have thought of it with her, if she hadn't started it. Then when she had, I'd just thought, why knock it back? I mean, what do you do at a time like that? Do you say, no, thanks, you're too fat, you're too ugly? You'd feel like a shit, treating a woman like that.

Then I thought, I'd feel like a shit if I even tried to explain it like that. So I said, that's true, I just felt like it.

And anyway, that was as far as it got that night. We were both tired out, and we just turned over finally and went to sleep. And that was as far as it got in the morning, too, because then all of a sudden everything was completely different. Alouette woke up first, and I saw her sitting up in bed, stretching. Then I reached out and touched her back, and then she came round and sort of knocked my hand away.

I was surprised then, and I said, what's up, what's the matter?

She said, no, not now. I'm just a bear in the morning.

I said, what about the Poirier zone?

She said, no, not even the Poirier zone.

Then she pulled the sheet round her, and she lay down facing away from me. Then I put my hand on her shoulder, and she just shook it away. So I got up then and shaved and dressed, and all the time I could see her in the mirror, lying there.

I said, you're sure you don't want anything else?

She said, yeah, quite sure.

So I finished getting dressed and I packed everything ready to go, and she never said anything else. Then I stood at the door ready to go, and she still didn't say anything, and then I tossed the key on the bed and just left her there. I paid my share of the room, and I caught the bus that afternoon. I was out of the place all day, and I never saw her again. That was the end of it.

Mark sat back in his chair in the dark, and stretched his legs. He was waiting for one of us to say something. Nobody said anything for a minute.

Then one of us said, so, why did she just stop like that?

Mark said, oh, I think it was a sort of ego thing. She wanted to be the one starting it, she wanted to be the one stopping it. Her game all the way.

Another one of us said, she really enjoyed it the night before?

Mark said, well, she seemed to. She put a lot of miles on me. I felt like a worn-out rowing machine afterwards. She was a big girl.

Another one of us said, you'd think she'd've wanted some more, then.

Mark said, well, at that stage I got the idea that she wasn't interested so much in enjoying herself, she was more interested in stopping me enjoying it. She got more fun out of saying no.

One of us said, feminist.

Mark said, well, she was trying to be a feminist. I wasn't so impressed. I mean, if that's feminism in Canada, it's nothing to what we've got. In Australia our feminists aren't interested in blokes at all.

Another one of us said, still, she won in the end.

Mark said, well, I don't know. I mean, I was only trying to give her a good time. It was a pity she got nasty, but then I had to go to Singapore anyway. And anyhow, I had a good time while it was going on. I had some free exercise. She was actually pretty good in there. I had a great time. I even saved a dollar on the night, just the way she said I would.

DAVID WINWOOD

WALK THROUGH AN UNVISITED CITY

The bald sparrow and the Golem,
the last one limping, outlined against a sky;
sleeping powders drop from the moon and
under cuddly clouds some men are dying.

Franz Kafka coughs under a bridge
but his fever-eyes have split away and are
fast nearing the aerodrome: some dream
of air tries to make it to his lungs.