

SIX

COMES OVER ONE an absolute necessity to... well, flee, in my case. What better manner of deception than a change of habitat? Which was easier said than done with the wheels of control in full swing. I longed for an age when travel had been risky and slow, but largely unseen. Which made me recall the old chap who lived on my right singing the praises of his native community, boasting he'd be received like a prince if he ever went back to the isle of his birth. Why he hadn't long done so was a mystery, considering the somewhat less than luxurious conditions that now marked his time. What was more intriguing was that he promised a similar welcome to the one he envisaged receiving himself to anyone who just mentioned his name there. One of my sisters, who still lived in town and who was – as they all more or less were – of a slightly more hopeful (or less desperate) complexion than the male side of the family, had spurred me on to go and have a look for myself. 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained', that kind of well-intentioned but tricky advice. As if every new venture hadn't proved to be a bigger calamity than the last.

Now, given the extent of my personal possessions and social connections, it wouldn't take an organizational genius to arrange my departure. I'd let the landlord find out for himself – which was as much as he could claim to deserve – and just pack my bags, the one bag that is that I owned, the bag that had served me so faithfully in the trials and tribulations of my

younger, more adventurous days. It had followed me like a dog on my travels abroad, never letting me down. In the big foreign city that smelled of more southern modes, of passionate love and sordid affairs, it had been my companion and brought me in touch with the other woman. It was a moist summer evening after a hot summer's day in a town swarming with life and excitement, and I was cooling my body as well as my nerves with huge mugs of beer in one of the myriad pavement cafés when she tripped over my bag and spilled most of her wine.

‘I’m sorry, you all right?’

‘It’s nothing, I wasn’t looking.’

‘Let me get you another ... , what is it you’re having?’

As I went to look for the waiter I saw her two friends, a mother and daughter as they turned out to be, giggling at my outdated chivalry. Two hours later I found myself taking leave of them – with kisses all round – in an advanced state of intoxication, having shown off my drinking prowess in the warm bath of so much unwonted feminine attention.

It was a daft notion, of course, but I made up my mind. I’d leave a note for my next-door neighbours – without telling them anything I didn’t want them to know – and contact my kin at a later stage, after throwing off my pursuers and safely escaping to the bliss of my new rural kingdom. I’d have to be patient and stick it out for the space of some forty odd hours, however, since the allowance the powers that be were bribing me with wasn’t forthcoming till then. In the meantime I’d have to make do with the tenner I always hid in my pillow for emergencies like the present.

He was a tough nut to crack. With a phone that had rusted from disuse (they’d stopped bugging him) and no mobile, he could only be dealt with in the old-fashioned way.

Well, he liked it, it made him feel like a craftsman, a creator of sorts, and he prided himself on his skill. He'd been a guard in a megastore until he was called to more sacred duties. He had nothing against them and he didn't mind if they were yellow or black, but these were desperate times and a man – or a nation – had the right to protect that which mattered: home and hearth, work and property, a religion upholding values. What got to him were those of his own kind who never lifted a finger but found fault with everything. Scratching their asses they bled the community, wallowing in self-pity and indignant boredom. What did they care if the world went to pieces?

Back in my den I marvelled how much beer you could buy for a fistful of dollars – or the equivalent in a normal man's money – provided you were willing to get it in cans instead of having it poured in a glass. I would stay in my room now biding my time and preparing my flight, with a few bars of chocolate to eke out or offset the booze. The whole thing was almost exhilarating, the gravity of the situation notwithstanding. It would be fun to say goodbye to this lot, losers, dropouts and dreamers – criminals some of them – though I got on with them well enough; fun too to thumb my nose at the despotism of institutional arrogance and the arrogance of dictatorial pygmies: I'd take their lousy charity one more time and then let them stick it up their fat, bureaucratic... whatever the word was they might be using themselves.

'This is the second time in a month you're invading my privacy.'

'If you'd kept your appointment we wouldn't have needed to.'

'You mean if I'd kept your appointment!'

'Any appointment we make with you is your appointment. But let's not quibble.'

'I'm glad you know the word, but we're talking about liberty, human rights, mere trifles to you, no doubt.'

'Cut the crap, will you? Now, can you show us a doctor's certificate for your alleged injuries?'

'You think my doctor's a fraud?'

'What?'

'Never mind. Just quibbling again. Force of habit. My doctor's on holiday, they always are when you need them.'

'Next Wednesday, ten o'clock at the office, and I want an indication when you'll be able to work again.'

'He told me he couldn't tell in these cases and I'm his patient. But he'll make an exception for you, I'm sure.'

He got up like a general who'd just saved the nation and went for the door. She had said nothing but she looked embarrassed and sad.

'And don't think I won't be back.'

'I put nothing past you. Use the bell next time. It's the one which says SOS – sink or swim, you know!'

She couldn't help smiling and the man shook his head in feigned disbelief as they left the room.

When the beer, which I drank straight from its wrapping to slow myself down (gotta leave something for tomorrow), was just about to refresh the parts other beers didn't reach, I dusted off the small rickety radio I'd almost forgotten I owned and searched for a classical channel. Listening to 'serious' music was the most saddening thing on this earth, but I was in the mood for self-mortification. As a boy I used to escape from the bedlam of my own home, where seven junior siblings were wreaking no less havoc on the more incorporeal than the

physical setting, to my uncle's house down the road. Theirs was as big a family, the difference being that most of the children were older and had left the parental shelter to build a nest for themselves. So the place was a haven of peace and I'd sit there for hours – I was the only youngster not of his own begetting my uncle would allow in the house – slaking my thirst for knowledge and beauty with the ravishing notes from the wireless and the adult books I'd pick up.

I would hear things now and then that weren't meant for my juvenile ears, because the grown-ups imagined I was too engrossed in my fictional world to catch a word they were saying. This was the time, after I'd just entered the awesome new territory of secondary education, that awareness of the limited nature of life and the finality of the end began to take hold of my consciousness and settle there, never to leave. (I'd been told by my mother I cried so much and so vehemently as a baby that it seemed like an inarticulate protest against the very fact of existence.) Lying in bed hearing the winter storms howl round the house, loath to get up and face my responsibilities, wishing to hide my head under the sheets and stay put forever, I was overwhelmed by an almost insane melancholy that threatened to paralyse the roots of my being. And roaming the countryside all alone after school – we hadn't yet moved to the city – the infinite sadness of rolling brown fields, stretching to where the hills cut them off, made me long to be swallowed up whole. The winter was endless.

As the grass tickled his nose announcing the beginning of spring, a pain of longing ran through his veins and made his breast hurt. Why did the birth of new life always make him both happy and sad? He thought of his love-life or the absence of it and wondered what would have happened. He'd been out

of his league with her but wasn't it better to aim high and miss than the other way round?

I might have fallen in love with the country had it not been for her nearness. The small fishing towns rising in steep gradients from a deep blue sea – their tortuous streets smelling of food and nostalgia – got under my skin. She was grander than ever and cooler than marble, the perfect counterpart to the inevitable citadel on the hilltop. So I left her to her futile suitors to go drown myself in the sinful pursuits of the harbour. Down by the water were the joints that catered for those like myself, *les misérables*, the feckless, the irresponsible – not fit to populate hell.

The creaky sound that spilled from my 'state-of-the-art' music box was that of a singer with a small band. Classical in its own way, the old negro voice, the plangent vibrato. *Put a twenty-dollar gold piece on my watch chain, so the boys will know I died standing back.*

The beer-mountain I'd built was dwindling at an alarming rate, so I'd have to come up with a glorious idea in the morning or else ask his royal highness, the prince of the islanders, (why did I have to make fun of him all the time?) to pay me back just a fraction of the amount he'd begged, borrowed or stolen from me in the course of our friendship.

Where shall I go when I go where I go, after you've sent me away?

The lyrics of these black ballads were poignantly true to life. Even though she'd never let me get to within a mile or so of any real contact, she'd managed to make my life miserable.

What shall I do when I do what I do, now that you've sent me away?

And here she'd come back to pester and plague me again,

if not worse. The foreign brew (I'd never shown any xenophobic proclivity in matters of alcoholic consumption), potent enough as a rule, couldn't prevent a tremor of anguish from mingling with the tearful longing that constricted my throat. What if she weren't alone?

Where shall I find what I found when I first...

A knock on the door that made my heart stop effaced the last words. Getting up gingerly and sniffing that odour again as I stepped to the door, the bloke in my head seized the opportunity:

'You're nothing but a crybaby, with your sentimental recollections and your smells and your frivolous fears! Try pulling yourself up by your bootstraps for once!'

Impelled by an invisible power I drew back the latch to find myself staring at the friendly but inquisitive face of the man I was now looking to for salvation, in a manner of speaking.

'Everything all right, old chum? You seem as if you'd just bumped into a ghost.'

'I was thinking about your island ... I mean Iceland, polar bears and furry old monsters, makes your hair stand on end.'

'They ain't got no bears and you ain't got no hairs,' he rhymed merrily. 'Fancy a cuppa made in the traditional way? You know, the one that cheers but not inebriates? Or am I interfering with more serious business?' he continued, pointing at the empty beer cans that littered the floor in a grotesque display of abandonment.

'Sorry, but I have some letters to write.'

'Suit yourself. I could do with a little pick-me-up myself, by the way. You wouldn't have a couple of those to spare, would you, before you've drunk them, I mean?'

Handing him half of what remained of my rations, I was about to withdraw when a thought crossed my mind.

‘You don’t happen to smell something, do you? Something unusual, I mean?’

‘No ... well ... bingo! You’ve got a new toothpaste.’

Shutting the door behind the old geezer I was relieved for a bit, thinking it might all be a hoax. I would finish the booze and see how I felt in the morning. I’d leave the radio on at a low volume, to keep me company. *Mr piano man, play me some downhome blues...*

That other girl, the one in the steaming, smelling, bustling, confusing foreign city had let me into her bed all right. I’d been roaming the tree-lined main streets and dark winding back alleys for what seemed like ages in my drunken lovesickness and then I met her again, as if by a miracle. She was alone this time, about to enter the door of her modest hotel.

‘I thought you’d never come.’