

Homecoming

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H O M E C O M I N G

Two men sat on the fore-castle head of the old tramp ship, as far forward as they could get. For over an hour they had been trying to work out a problem, but saying few words, with long silences intervening between scraps of conversation. They drank beer straight from the bottle and smoked innumerable cigarettes. They flicked the butts over the side, and these looked like falling stars as they dropped down into the dark water. The ship's bow made an arrowhead of white foam as she rose and fell. The sky was dull with cloud, with few stars showing, and the night was cold.

In three days the ship would be in England and the crew paid off. That was the problem the two men had to face. It had been a long voyage, and this was the first time in two years that they were back in their home port. These two years had been for each of them a period of close friendship and intimacy such as neither had ever known before; now they had to decide whether their futures could continue together, or whether it was time to make a clean break and each go his own way.

Paul Groves was slightly the younger of the two, though he looked older than his twenty-five years. He was fair-haired, slim of build, with a sensitive face, and skin deeply tanned from sun and wind. He pitched an empty bottle over the side and whipped the cap off a full one. «I still think you ought to come home with me, Andy,» he said. «After all, you've got nowhere else to go in London, except some seaman's club or other.»

Andy Kerridge was taller, more thickset in build, darker in complexion, and had features more rugged, more masculine than his companion, and his smile in the half-darkness was very gentle.

«God knows I'd like to come, Paul,» he said. «I'd like to come more than anything else in the world, but there's your wife to think of, and the kid. What we've been to each other in the past two years must come to an end sooner or later, and as you're going back to your wife, I think it had better be sooner. A man should not come between another man and his wife.»

Paul sighed. «But I don't want to go back to my wife. That's all finished, as a marriage. It was finished almost before it started. I've told you before, my wife is a bitch; a horrible, bleeding, flickering bitch. And the kid isn't mine. I'm only going home this time to see if I can buy my freedom, and I want you to stand by while we have some sort of showdown. I know it's a bit rough, getting you involved in my domestic life, but I wish you'd do it, just for me.» The slow pleading smile that Andy always found hard to resist passed over his face. Andy could hardly see it in the dark, but was only too aware of Paul's hand placed on his, and the pressure behind it.

«Besides, Andy, if you won't come, I won't go home. I'll stay with you,» he continued.

I'd love to do it, Paul, but is it the right thing? After all, Angela is your wife, and you married her for better or worse and all that sort of thing. Maybe if you stayed ashore and took a shoreside job, you might be able to work things out together. The sea is no life for a married man and it's worse for his wife if she is going to be left alone for a couple of years on end. You can't blame a woman if she kicks over the traces under those circumstances. You've got to face it.»

«Would you stay ashore, Andy, if I did?»

Andy thought for a moment. «No, Paul. Very definitely no. I'd go as far away from you as possible. I am what I am, and I know what I am, and I know that I'll never be any different from what I am. There's hope for you, away from me. For me, I can only keep on moving. I could not stay ashore, particularly being where you are, because if I did that, your marriage would have no chance at all. It's best that you and I part company for good and all.»

«Would you stay with me if we signed on a ship with a more regular run, so that we were never away for more than a few weeks at a time?»

«No.»

«Is that what you want, Andy, to get away from me? Is that what you really want?» Paul stood up, and viciously threw an empty bottle over the side. The stricken look on his face was visible in the semi-darkness.

Andy also rose and crossed to the rail away from Paul. «No, Paul,» he said. «I'd like to stick with you for ever. But I won't share you with anyone, least of all Angela.»

I just think you ought to make some attempt to save your marriage and give up the sort of life we've had together.»

«I can't give it up. I don't want to, and I won't.»

«Seven years, you've been married, isn't it, Paul?»

«Nearly eight. I wasn't quite eighteen when we married, and Angela, that's a hell of a name for a girl like that, tricked me into it. She was the first girl I'd ever been with, in fact, the only one, and I'd only been with her once or twice when she said she was going to have a kid and I'd have to marry her. I knew nothing, and I fell for it. The kid turned out to be her boss's, but he was married, not that I think he ever would have married her if he hadn't been. Anyhow, I was a simple clot, and there was nothing to do but make the best of it, and I tried my best to do just that. After four years of hell I packed it up and came to sea. She was two-timing me with other men right after we were married. I knew it, but I could never prove anything. She was laughing at me all the time, and reminding me that the kid wasn't mine, but that I could not divorce her for anything she'd done before marriage. I tried to stick it out for the kid's sake, because even though he wasn't mine, it wasn't his fault, and I was fond of him. But she turned him against me, and I failed there too. When he was only four years old he knew I wasn't his father. Maybe if I'd waited long enough I might have found some evidence for a divorce, but she was too clever, and after four years, I'd had as much as I could stand. But even when I first came to sea, I hoped we could make a go of it. It wasn't till I met you, Andy, that I knew I'd never go back to Angela.»

«I know it's tough, Paul.» Andy admitted. «But quite apart from all that, think of the way things have been between you and me. Is that the right way of life for you? You've been married, while I've never been with a woman in my life. I tried once or twice, but couldn't do a thing. You can, and have. Is the way I live good for you Paul? That's the thing I've thought about quite a lot since we've been together.»

Paul laughed. «Of course it is,» he said. «And I should have known it years ago. I was never able to give Angela the satisfaction she wanted, mainly because I was never really interested in the sexual side of marriage. I tried though, and I know the breakdown was largely my fault, but not entirely, because she was dishonest with me right from the beginning. Of course when I think back what I was like as a kid, shy, a bit girlish even, wanting to know other boys but always a bit afraid of them, awkward at games and all that sort of things, I should have known how I was going to grow up. When I got older, and the other fellows I knew were going out with girls, I thought I ought to do it too, though I never wanted to. Then when I did, with Angela, I dropped myself right in the fertilizer, as you well know.»

Andy did not speak, and there was silence for a minute or two. Then Paul crossed to where Andy was standing. «Andy,» he said slowly, «what you are, what I am, is only our concern; no one else's. My two years knowing you have been the best, the happiest years of my life. I don't want to give it all away; in fact I won't give any of it away, not any of it. If I hadn't met you and found out things about myself, I'd have met someone else. Only I'm glad it was you. I was just unlucky to get involved in this mess with Angela, or just plain stupid. I can't try to save a marriage when there never was one to save, so I want to finish it once and for all. So I have to go home. I won't go alone, so I want you to come. Please come.»

Andy was still silent. Paul continued to plead.

«I know what I'm doing, Andy, and I know what I want from life. Is it too much to ask of you, to help me get my freedom?»

Andy sighed. «Paul,» he said. «You know I couldn't deny you anything. I'll come, but how I can help you, I'm damned if I know.»

Paul grinned, and put his arm over Andy's shoulder. «Thanks, Andy, I knew I could count on you. You know what? I'd like to kiss you. When we go below, I think I will.»

Andy grinned back. «Let's go below. What I mean is,» he said to the now excited Paul. «we'd better get some sleep before we go on watch.»

They went below.

*

The house was like any one of the other hundred or so houses in the street, distinguishable only by the number on the door. The two men arrived in the late afternoon. Angela let them in.

«It's time you got here,» she said ungraciously. «If you'd been ten minutes later you wouldn't have been able to get in. I've got a date and I'm going out.»

This was her greeting; there was no embrace.

«You know it's late when we clear customs and get paid off,» Paul replied. «We couldn't get here any quicker. This is Andy. He's staying too. He and I can have the spare room and Peter can move in with you. Didn't you get my letter from Las Palmas?»

«I only got it yesterday, and you didn't say you were bringing anyone with you. Besides, a week ago I arranged to go dancing and I'm not going to put it off.»

Angela was about the same age as Paul, and was pretty in a tarty sort of way. She was well, even expensively dressed, but her makeup was overdone and her grooming was careless. Her green eyes were cold and the glance she gave Andy was not the least bit friendly.

«How long do you intend to stay?» she demanded.

«We don't know,» Paul admitted. «Until we get another ship I guess.»

«Well you'd better make the most of it,» she replied. «You won't be seeing much of me. I've taken a job in a bar and I have only two nights off a week. Tonight is one of them.»

«Was the job necessary?» Paul asked. «You get a good allotment.»

«Allotment!» she replied with scorn. «Do you think I could live on the few lousy pounds a week you give me? Besides, I like a bit of life, and I like it in the bar.»

«Who looks after the kid when you're working, if you're out every night?»

«He lives with Mum. It's better for him there. I can't work and have him around.»

«I can't see that the job was necessary, I give you really more than I can afford.»

«It's none of your business. I just can't live on your lousy allotment. Anyhow, I'm going out. Even though Peter isn't here you'd better share the spare room with your friend, and if you want to eat, you'll have to go out. I haven't had time to get anything in. You'll find a spare key lying about somewhere.»

Outside in the street, a car horn honked twice. The woman glanced rather apprehensively towards the door, hurriedly adjusted her hat, and left the house without another word. Through the living room window they could see her getting into a sleek sports car, and they had a brief glimpse of the driver as he leaned over to close the car door.

«That's him,» said Paul excitedly. «That's her ex-boss. So it's still going on.»

The car drove away. Paul followed it with his eyes until it was out of sight; then he turned to Andy. «Well, that's our homecoming, and that's just how I knew it would be.» He surveyed the room. There were three lounge chairs, with neglected upholstery. There was a vase of artificial flowers, and a few photographs of film stars, all male.

«Look at this mess. If we kept our quarters like this the chief officer would do his nut. It's dirty, untidy, dusty. I'm kind of sorry I brought you, Andy, but I just felt I couldn't face it alone. I've got to get out of it somehow.»

«Don't worry about it tonight, Paul,» Andy said. «Let's go up to the West End and have some food there and see some lights and some people. It's good to be back in London again.»

Paul took their bags upstairs and searched round until he found a key. The spare room contained a double bed and a battered dressing table. There were no flowers or pictures. Downstairs in the kitchen there was a pile of unwashed dishes, but they left them untouched. They took a tube to Piccadilly Circus.

They had a meal in a small Italian restaurant in Soho and drinks in various places and found it pleasant to walk around Piccadilly Circus looking at the old familiar places and checking up on what was showing in the theatres in Shaftsbury Avenue and St. Martin's Lane. It was late when they got back to the house. Angela had apparently just returned. She was standing on the footpath talking to a man, and it was not the same man with whom she had gone out.

«You can't come in tonight,» she was saying. «My husband came back today, damn him.» Then she saw the two men and was silent until they had let themselves into the house. They went upstairs to their room, and it was an hour later before they heard her come upstairs. She did not disturb them.

In the days that followed they saw little of her, and when they did she still maintained her attitude of hostility towards Paul and continued to ignore Andy. She would go to her job about mid-morning and rarely returned until late at night. If she came back to the house in the afternoon they were unaware of it as they were usually out

themselves during the day. They decided to clean up the house. Paul said that if they were going to live there they might as well make it fit for human habitation. They saw some shows and spent a lot of time in the bars. Andy had to pay for most of their entertainment, but this he was glad to do, for Paul. Andy could see little point in staying on in London and he suggested flying over to Paris. He could take care of things financially for quite a long time, until they decided to join another ship. Paul would have liked to go to Paris, but was reluctant to go until he had obtained the promise of a divorce from Angela, but whenever he introduced the subject, she refused to discuss it. She was, apparently, too clever to leave any evidence lying about.

One morning when Paul had gone out to do some shopping, Andy was making tea in the kitchen when Angela came downstairs. She was dressed to go out.

«How long do you two count on staying here?» she demanded.

Andy poured out a cup of tea for himself and offered her one, which she accepted.

«I don't know,» he said. «It depends on Paul. Are we in the way?»

«I'm not used to having people about and I like the place to myself.»

«I suppose it's Paul's house as well as yours.» Andy said coldly. «He told me he pays the rent.»

«That's beside the point. I keep it going.»

«With Paul's money.»

«And with my own. I work too.»

«Do you have to? Paul gives you a good allotment.»

«How can a girl live on that, and keep up appearances. I'd like to know?»

«I think you do better than a lot of people.» Andy said, deliberately looking her up and down. «That outfit did not come from this part of town.»

She was suddenly angry. «Now Mister, I don't see what the hell that's got to do with you.»

«Nothing at all,» he agreed. «But Paul is my friend, and if you ask me, I think you're giving him a raw deal.»

«Mister, I didn't ask you.»

«I'm telling you.»

Angrily she put down her cup, so that it clattered in the saucer. «How much do you know about Paul and me?» she asked.

«What he told me, and what I've seen for myself. You're no wife to him.»

Her eyes narrowed. «And what gives between you and Paul?»

«We're friends, mates, if that's what you mean.»

«I've got eyes in my head,» she remarked casually. «I've always thought Paul was a bit odd, and now that you're here, I'm sure of it.»

Andy's heart jumped. To gain time, he lit a cigarette, and hoped that she would not see that his hand was shaking. «How do you mean, odd? And why, now that I'm here?»

«What do you think I mean? I haven't been married to him for nearly eight years without getting to know him.»

«He's been at sea for more than half that time.»

«Makes no difference. I can tell by the way he looks at you, by the way he follows you around, that there's something going on. I know the signs with people like you. I see and hear a lot from behind the bar.» She giggled nastily. «Funny thing, though,» she added, «you look more like a real man than he does.»

«I think you're letting your imagination run away with you,» Andy's voice was frigid.

«A girl needs imagination to be married to a clot like Paul. That soft, pansy type who wants to read books and listen to highbrow music and doesn't know how to give a girl a good time. I'm damned if I know why I ever married him.»

Andy looked at her sideways and could not suppress a grin. «I know why you married him, Angela,» he said. «He told me.»

Angela flushed. «You bastard,» she spat at him. «I might have known.»

«Paul's a good bloke, Angela, and I like you too.» Andy told the lie with his tongue in his cheek. «But Paul's not your type, and neither of you get anything out of being married to each other. Why don't you divorce him?»

«That I will never do, until it suits me.»

«I can't see why not now.»

«Until I can marry the man I want to marry, I stay married to Paul. At least I can count on some security from the poor sap so long as he pays up each month, and he's got to pay up. When I can make other plans, I'll do so.»

Andy crushed out his cigarette and got up from his chair. «Angela, you're a bitch.» he said. «A flipping, bloody bitch.»

The colour mounted in her cheeks. «I'll thank you not to insult me in my own house.»

Andy grinned, as he crossed to where she was standing. «Just a bleeding, mercenary little bitch, but there's something about you that appeals to me and if you were not Paul's wife, I'd like to do something about it.»

Insolently she stared at him. If she were surprised, she did not show it. «And just what would you like to do, Mister?»

For a full minute he stood in front of her grinning, his white teeth flashing in his brown face and with laughter in his eyes. She tried to outstare him, but failed.

«Just this.» he said, taking her in his arms, and kissing her on the mouth. She tried to struggle, but he was too strong. She tried to call out, but with his mouth on hers, she could not utter a sound. She soon gave up the struggle, and returned his kiss with the same intensity as it was given. After a while they relaxed. Andy wanted to be sick, but he kept his arms tightly around her.

«See what I mean?» he asked.

«I think I do.» she admitted reluctantly. «Maybe I was wrong, about you, anyhow. I didn't expect that, Mister. And you've been here for four days.»

«We've still time to get to know each other better.»

«With Paul hanging around, following you everywhere you go?»

«Paul!» Andy said, trying hard to infuse a sneer in his voice. «Paul's my friend, and he's a good bloke, but he's a bit wet, as you say. I wouldn't let Paul interfere with my private life, even though he is my mate. What goes on between a man and a woman has nothing to do with a man and his pal. Of course,» he added with a conspiratorial wink. «I wouldn't altogether like him to know about this, though.»

With the sound of the front door being opened they had to break it up, and Paul entered the kitchen with an armful of groceries as Angela was adjusting her hair and putting on her hat. Paul looked from one to the other and Angela went out without a word to either.

«What makes you so red in the face, Andy? Has she been getting at you?»

«I hope you brought some beer, Paul. I really need one.»

«I've got some, but what's been going on between you two?» Paul poured out two beers. Andy gulped his down, and poured out another, which he sipped slowly.

«As a matter of fact, old boy, we've been having a bit of a session.»

Paul looked incredulous. «Well, bugger me!» was all he could say. A moment later, he added: «You have too. You've got lipstick all over your face.»

«Paul, this may be the chance you've been waiting for. I've got a plan.»

For the next hour they sipped beer and went into a huddle like two conspirators, until the plan was all worked out.

Paul had some doubts. «All the same, Andy, I don't like to let you in for this.»

«It's the least I can do for you Paul. Besides, I'm doing it just as much for myself. It's you I want, Paul, and not to share. I'm afraid only of one thing. When the time comes, will I be man enough to go through with it?»

Two days later, on a Sunday morning, Angela's son Peter arrived. By this time Angela had softened considerably towards Andy, though towards Paul she was still frigid. Her changed attitude to Andy was manifested only when Paul was not around, and there had been another incident further to stimulate her interest. Andy, after taking a bath, and thinking Angela was out, was walking naked from the bathroom to the bedroom, when Angela appeared from her own room. She gave a gasp, and threw herself into his arms. The embrace was a brief one, for Paul called to Andy to hurry. Angela broke away and ran down the steps, looking backwards as she did so. With all the nonchalance that he could muster, Andy stood grinning at her until she disappeared. Then he went into the bedroom and collapsed.

Andy and Paul were having breakfast in the kitchen when Peter appeared. Angela was drinking a cup of coffee; she was dressed in a somewhat tatty negligee and her whole attitude was sullen. All the same, she now found it hard to take her eyes off Andy. Peter was an arrogant little Cockney. He recognised Paul, but ignored him when Paul spoke. To Andy he said: «What are you doing here? I suppose you're one of ma's boyfriends.»

«Shut up, Peter,» said Paul mildly.

«I won't shut up,» Peter retorted. «I suppose he's been here all night.»

Angela flushed, but said nothing.

«He's my guest,» Paul explained. «He's been here for nearly a week.»

«So you're bringing them in too!» Peter remarked insolently. «Better watch out that she doesn't get her hands on him.»

«That's no way to speak to your father,» Angela rebuked him.

«Him!» Peter said scornfully. «He ain't my flipping father. I know who my father is. My father's always good for a few bob when I put the pressure on.»

Angela swung at him with her hand and caught him a blow on the side of the head. It had little effect as he had seen it coming and had ducked it more or less successfully. Still arrogant he stood his ground.

«Why don't you two flicker off? You ain't wanted around here, and you should have knew it long ago.»

Angela left the kitchen and Peter followed her. They could hear him demanding money; that was the only reason for his visit.

«Now you've seen the whole setup,» Paul said wearily. «That little brat is going to grow up into a first class gangster. Angela has no more control over him than I have. I was prepared to accept him and try to make a man out of him, but it's been hopeless from the start.»

Andy crossed to where Paul was sitting and pressed his shoulder with his hand. «I see all that, old boy. Never mind. Won't be long now. Let's clean up and go out.»

Paul's answering smile was filled with gratitude.

Next morning Paul announced that he was going to visit his brother in Edinburgh; he would be gone for three days, and there was no need for Andy to inconvenience himself by moving out, unless there was somewhere he wanted to go. Andy agreed to see him off on the night train. Angela listened to their plans.

Half an hour before closing time Andy appeared in the bar where Angela worked.

«What brings you here?» she asked. «You've never been here before.» She drew him the pint of bitter that he had called for.

«I've never had the chance,» he answered. «I couldn't come with Paul around, could I?»

«Has he gone?»

«Yes. Nearly changed his mind too. I had to push him on the train. It's non-stop too. He can't get off before Edinburgh.»

He sipped his beer. «Just thought I might be able to walk home with you?»

«What makes you think I haven't any other plans?» she asked coyly.

«You can always wipe them down. Besides, you knew I was coming in, didn't you?»

She shrugged her shoulders and walked to the other end of the bar to serve some other customers, to whom she stopped to talk, from time to time glancing in Andy's direction. He quickly finished his pint, and someone else served him his second. Andy was drinking his third when the man who had called for Angela the day he and Paul had arrived entered the bar. He spoke to Angela, and while they talked they glanced frequently in Andy's direction. The man appeared to be annoyed at something Angela was trying to explain to him, and scowling, left the bar. Angela drifted down to Andy to tell him it was five minutes to closing time. He ordered a whisky and offered her one, which she accepted. He asked her to get him a bottle to take home.

«You're not thinking of making it a party?» she asked.

He grinned. «I see no reason why not.»

«Don't take too much for granted,» she said, but she smiled at the same time. «I'll see you outside in ten minutes.»

Andy waited outside until she joined him. He looked calm enough, though inwardly he was afraid.

«I could have gone to a really good party,» she said as they walked back to the house. «I don't know why I gave it up, just for you.»

He pressed her arm. «I think we can have a much better party alone, just the two of us.»

«I told you not to take too much for granted,» she reminded him softly.

They were soon back at the house. Andy was relieved to see a small dark car parked unobtrusively a few doors down the street. Inside the house Andy fixed the drinks and they settled themselves comfortably on a sofa.

«I wish Paul would stay away a week, instead of three days,» Andy said.

«We don't have to talk about Paul, do we?» Angela said crossly.

«No, but I can't help feeling a bit guilty about this.»

«I don't. He's a clot, but he serves my purpose.»

«Don't you think you're a bit cold blooded about it?» Andy demanded.

«How do you mean?»

«Well, there are other men in your life. That's obvious. It's not fair to him.»

«Who wants to be fair?»

«You're a soulless little bitch, aren't you?»

It was not the right prelude for seduction and Angela drew away from him indignantly. Andy recollected that he had a job to do. He pulled her closer and kissed her hard on the mouth.

«You're just making a sucker out of him,» he said between kisses. «Just as I think you make a sucker out of most men you meet.»

«And do you care?»

He grinned. «Not a bit. So long as you don't make one out of me.»

She laughed. Her mouth was a blurred smear in the half-darkness. Andy realised he was more than a little drunk, and he would have to be careful with the whisky. Angela's eyes were fixed intently on his.

«Damn it all,» he said. «What does it matter? To hell with Paul anyhow.»

He kissed her again, this time with all the passion of which he was capable. Then he took another shot of whisky very quickly. He did not want to ruin his plan, but he wanted to be sure that he could accomplish what he had set out to do. Women like Angela had never entered his life before.

«Why don't we go upstairs?» he said thickly.

Angela's room was in the front of the house. There was a mad half-hour of wild lovemaking, at which Andy acquitted himself far better than he thought himself capable of doing.

Suddenly the room was flooded with light and Paul and an unknown man stood in the doorway. Andy grabbed a sheet with which to cover himself. Angela's face was red and congested, but before she could speak, the unknown man introduced himself.

«I'm MacTaggart, of MacTaggart's Discrete Enquiry Agency.» He proffered a card each to Andy and Angela. «At your service at any time, sir and madam, for discrete domestic enquiries.» He bowed and left the room.

«Now, you little slut, I've got you where I want you,» Paul said to Angela. Then he slapped her hard on both cheeks. «I've been wanting to do this for a long time. I'll see about the divorce in the morning.» He walked round to Andy. «As for you, my friend . . .»

Andy got to his feet. «I'm sorry, Paul.»

Paul winked at him, and then hit him hard on the jaw. «Why don't you lie down?» he said. Andy fell back on the bed. A few moments later the front door slammed. Angela was crying, but with temper rather than shame. Andy poured out two whiskies and took one round to Angela.

«That looks like the end of a beautiful friendship,» he said. «And the end of a not very successful marriage.»

Angela took the drink. «Damn him,» she said, biting her lip. «Whoever would have thought the bastard would pull one like that? And you his friend, too.»

Then realisation came. «And you pushed him into the train for Edinburgh? Why, you dirty, double crossing pair of pricks, you thought it up between you.» She threw the whisky in Andy's face, and aimed a kick, successfully, at his groin. He doubled up, recovered quickly when her nails started to claw at him, grabbed his clothes and rushed from the room. It took him only a few minutes to pack and get out of the house. Paul, who had taken his bag earlier in the day, was waiting for him with Mr. MacTaggart.

«Everything all right?» he asked MacTaggart.

«Perfect.»

«She suspects a frameup. Could she defend?»

«She could, but I doubt if she will. That sort seldom do, and it costs money.»

«Nearly tore me to pieces she did,» Andy said. «And I tell you, my friend, that I'm going to have a sore jaw and a hell of a hangover in the morning.»

Paul laughed happily. Had to make it realistic. Never mind, you can take it out of me, sometime. »

Paul squeezed his arm. «I will, too, just as soon as we get to Paris, tomorrow.»

Later that night, as they settled down in the hotel room in Kensington they had booked earlier in the day, Paul remarked: «I just can't realise that I'm almost free, after eight long, awful years.»

Andy rubbed his sore jaw and looked at him intently. «What do you mean, buddy-boy? You'll never be really free so long as I'm around.»

Paul drew closer to him. «I know.» he said contentedly. «But that's different.»

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by STORNOWAY

Thoughts in the Small Hours

Thinking about my life now I realise how many years I have been stupid and blind. Years which have left their mark on my features.

How foolish I was to wait, to put back that wonderful experience of being loved. Now I feel so wonderful that I ought to try to recapture some of those lost years, all those years containing hours of love lost forever.

Yet how can I? It's too late now to become a romantic dreamer. I could kick myself when I remember all those wasted opportunities. Times when I could have made some sign, some gesture. Would anyone have understood?

I expect everyone at times looks back at the past and regrets. My mistake was my silence. With no one to explain to, no one to give me any advice or comfort.

Always alone. Alone... what a little word yet how vast its meaning... I was so alone that I used to believe that there was no one anywhere who cared about me. Not one person who realised that I existed. I was like a ghost, a shadow.

Oh those long lonely winter nights when I shivered and prayed in my cold bed. Those hot summer evenings when sleep was impossible. And the spring when my poor frustrated brain sent such distorted dreams that I awoke screaming.

Still, there was no one to smooth my fevered brow or whisper sweet endearments until I fell asleep again.

When I remember I know that all this could have been avoided, but I didn't know. I didn't guess that I in my private world wasn't unique, I wasn't alone. I was just one in thousands who suffered the same nightmares... I was but one star in a vast universe of stars.

I could cry now at my ignorance. Why didn't I go out in the evenings? Why didn't I go to a bar and buy someone a drink? I could have met people, made friends in the outside world. I could have enjoyed those teenage years, dancing through my twenties, drinking, gambling through my thirties. And now at forty three it's too late.

Hark... my lover moves restlessly on the bed. I can see the dark locks against the white of the pillow.

Soon it will be morning. The dawn of a new day, perhaps the dawn of a new life. A new world will be born.

My old world behind its barrier has fallen, yet everything will be the same. The old grey buildings across the street will still be the same grey ugly colour. The sky will still be blue, the birds will still sing the same way. People will still argue and shout in the street below.

They'll all be the same, do all the same things but I'll be different. I'll be someone at last. No longer a shadow living in the twilight world.

Now today for the first time I'll see someone wake beside me, feel another warm body against mine. I'll have company at breakfast and be able to talk to someone instead of myself.

Ah... the sun has broken through, the buildings opposite are turning pink in the spring light. It's morning... the first day of my life.

I'm born at last into my world.

I must wake my loved one. We'll watch the dawn together... just the two of us. Keith and Brian, two stars that have fallen together through the black night sky into a heaven of their own.

by D. A. Johnstone