

The Library
by
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‘I am afraid we haven’t got a copy, but down in Hornsey they do. Reserve stock. You want me to get it over?’

‘Reserve?’ Donald raised an eyebrow, bemused.

‘Some books are not kept out, you know.’

‘But it’s only poetry.’

The young librarian laughed. ‘It doesn’t mean it’s pervy. There’s just not enough room for everything on the shelves.’ She consulted a little card taped to the desk. ‘If I call now, it should be here on Wednesday.’

Donald frowned and adjusted his cap; he pulled on a pair of red and yellow knitted gloves. ‘No, don’t bother. I’ll go down there now and ask for it myself. Thank you.’

Donald was a short, dumpy man whose coat was much too big for him. It had belonged to his father. Both his parents had died in the early Thatcher years and he had drifted down to London from Luton with not much more than a bag of old clothes. He had no other family. His father used to talk of an uncle of his who also had come to Britain from Ceylon, like Donald and his parents, but that had been long before the Second World War; he had never kept in touch. As Donald grew older, he became more and more obsessed with information about anyone who could be regarded as a predecessor from the island of his forebears.

Recently he had been on the trail of a poet. He had first caught sight of him in a book about Leonard Woolf; a passing reference to a young Ceylonese poet who had visited the Woolfs in Bloomsbury after the Hogarth Press had reissued *The Village in the Jungle*, the novel Leonard had written after his experience of Ceylon. Donald had first assumed the visitor was Tambimuttu, poet and progressive publisher who was the one of the first to celebrate the new diversity of English poetry. But then he'd discovered that Tambimuttu had arrived in London only in 1938, six years after the reported meeting. Donald had scoured through all the accounts of the 1920s and 1930s he could find, but there was only one other mention of the man. He had been noticed at a bohemian gathering, a glass of cider in his hand, mocking Mr Eliot. 'Tcha, bad move,' Donald had clucked and turned the page. The next sentence simply stated that this fine young poet had gone on to produce one pamphlet — four leaves, seven poems — before disappearing from the scene. Nothing more. No name, no title for the pamphlet, no clue to what had happened. Only that this promising voice had faded away. After that just one minor footnote: there had been a poem apparently dedicated to this Ceylonese writer by a Hornsey poet briefly in the limelight two decades later.

Donald himself was not a poet, although he had flirted with the idea as a young man. To recollect in tranquillity was something he had been prepared to do when he first moved to London. After a few false starts, he had ended up better employed in the downstairs registry of a welfare organisation

ordering files from H to P. He had two colleagues dealing with the rest of the alphabet and a boss who drank vodka out of a mug. Donald proved to be a wizard at finding any scrap of paper he filed, but promotion eluded him. Management, he was told after ten years in the department, required more than a prodigious memory and a penchant for paper.

After the initial disappointment of this news, back in 1993, Donald had accepted his limitations and devoted all of his spare time to the preservation of his personal heritage. A man has to find his own place in the scheme of things, he told himself, and began to hoard facts and artefacts from Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, good and bad. His tiny flat on the Archway Road slowly turned into a museum crammed with wooden curios, brassware, files of cuttings and piles of second-hand books of colonial history retrieved from charity shops and bric-a-brac stalls all over London.

On this Saturday morning, it was a little gusty outside the small branch library on Shepherd's Hill. The wind hadn't quite begun to howl as it was doing from Yeovil to Basingstoke, denuding fat oaks and toppling chimney pots, but Donald noticed how it lifted the lids off the bins down the road. He looped his scarf over his cap to keep it in place and made a knot around his neck. He liked his cap – £3.50 from Marker's in Holloway – and he didn't want to lose it.

At the gate, he looked cautiously both ways before stepping out on to the pavement. The last time he had left the library he had been too engrossed in Keynesian economic theory and had

blundered into the path of a speeding four-year-old from the nearby community centre. There had been no serious damage but the nap of his suede shoes had not recovered. This time there were no vehicles. Only Janice Conway who was having trouble folding her baby's buggy. The hood billowed like a sail as the wind caught it. Her car door banged shut. 'Oh, bugger,' she swore before she saw Donald.

'Too windy?'

'It's a bloody hurricane.' She put a foot on the buggy's wheel and punched the plastic hood down.

'Can I hold it for you?' Donald asked. He knew her from a neighbourhood residents' meeting, several years earlier, where she had spoken passionately against road-widening. He had seconded her motion and since then they'd exchanged pleasantries on the rare occasions they met.

She was a tall strapping woman and looked down at him from a great height trying to work out which would fly first, the bundle that was Donald, or the rickety buggy. 'If you could hang on to it, I'll strap Tommy in before he leaps out of the other end and creates Armageddon.'

Donald gripped the handle. 'Right. I've got it.'

She yanked the door open again and ducked in; Donald averted his eyes from her stooped back and puckered jeans.

When she emerged again, another gust made him stagger. She caught the buggy and swiftly collapsed it. 'Thanks. Can I give you lift somewhere?'

'It's ok, I am just going down to the main library.'

‘Get in. I’ll be passing that way. It’s not safe walking in this gale .’

Donald looked at the line of trees swaying along the road. The tails of his coat flapped dangerously around his legs. ‘Well , if you really are going past it . . .’

‘Yes, I am.’ She slid behind the wheel and started the car. ‘Come on.’

In the back of the car, Tommy howled and thrashed about. Janice fumbled in an open bag by the gear stick and found a teething ring with brightly coloured plastic keys. She shook it in the air and then, twisting around, passed it to the child. ‘Shush, Tommy, shush. Mummy’s driving, Tommy, driving.’

Donald noticed that she was looking more in the rear- view mirror than at the road ahead. Perhaps it was inevitable if you crave a family. He checked the buckle of his seat-belt and silently thanked the Romans for their straight roads and the ancients for their ley lines. He had only once before thought of marriage and the idea of bringing up a family. That was when Sharon had joined as the new receptionist at work. She had a lovely smile and her cheerful greeting would always banish his gloom, along with the cold and grime of the street outside. But within three months, before he had plucked up the courage to say anything, she had quit and emigrated to New Zealand with the I T manager on the second floor. Donald had been quite upset .

Tommy howled louder and chucked the teething ring at the

window.

‘Oh, dear. I’m sorry.’ Janice shifted down. Her nose twitched. ‘I think he needs a nappy change. I have to pull over. I can’t go all the way to Sainsbury’s with him like that.’ She stopped by the small public garden half-way down the road.

Donald opened the door. ‘That’s fine. This will do nicely.’

‘Why don’t you take a turn in the garden. I won’t be a minute. Really.’

The wind had dropped and Tommy, awed by his power to stop the car, and his mother, had gone silent. Donald, trapped by a combination of favour and obligation, unnerving social protocol and unpredictable weather, grunted.

He stepped down on to the overgrown path and made his way through the becalmed trees. Above him he heard a woody staccato. He looked up and heard the hammering again, like a highly sprung bouncing ball. Then he saw it: the crested head of an angular woodpecker. He hadn’t seen one in years. Not since he’d left Luton. He watched it go again, bobbing madly. Then a big fat pigeon crashed through the trees and the woodpecker flew away. Donald walked down to the empty shambolic field below and gazed at the allotments beyond and the hills on the other side with Alexander Palace shored up like a wreck in the distance. The woods dotted about the hills floated in muted autumn colours. A sense of foreboding seemed to seep out of them, staining the air. He thought of the bird that had vanished. He felt he was becoming invisible too, perhaps like his anonymous poet, lost in a state of hibernation. Besides

his colleagues in the basement in Pentonville, the woman at the Post Office, the odd librarian and grocer, and Janice, no one knew him at all and he knew no one else in the city. After Donald's father died, his mother complained that her memories were too much to bear alone. She said she needed more than a graveyard, she needed a sense of a shared past. In Luton they had lived very much on their own.

He made his way slowly back up the path to the car. Janice called out to him. 'That's it. Master Tommy is much happier now.' She handed him a knotted pink polythene bag. 'Could you sling that in the bin for me, please.'

He held it gingerly by one of the loops and dropped it in the black litter bin.

'Nice spot. I sometimes take Tommy down to the field . '

'I saw a woodpecker,' Donald said.

' Blimey. What's it doing here?'

'Nesting?'

Janice tapped a cassette into the car stereo and they set off. 'Yankee Doodle' started and Tommy began to clap his hands.

'Oh, God. Not that.' Janice turned it down.

'He likes it, doesn't he?'

'He loves it. The only bloody thing his father, the ex, ever did was play this. But even that was too much for the tosser. '

Donny nodded. 'It's catchy, but . . .'

'Actually I might pop in with you and pick up a new tape from the kiddies' section. Check out the notice board, too. I find the Hornsey one very handy, don't you?'

‘I am looking for a poem.’

‘Oh, really?’ She turned to look at him, neatly avoiding a flustered masked cyclist as she did so. ‘Are you a poet?’

‘Not at all.’ Donald lowered his head sheepishly. ‘I just read a bit.’

‘My grandfather was a poet. He wrote a lot of poems back in the fifties. Maybe you know of him? G. F. Parker?’

Donald unwrapped his scarf and pulled off his cap. The car had warmed up with more gleeful tunes and gurgles. ‘Parker? That’s the one.’

‘You are looking for him?’ She laughed as she shot through the traffic lights. ‘Grandpa?’

Donald gripped the armrest on the door. ‘Well, it’s this poem you see. He wrote a poem and dedicated it to another poet. That’s the one I am looking for.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘That’s the problem. All I know is that G. F. Parker dedicated a poem to him. I was going to look for his book to find out.’

‘Grandpa was always dedicating poems. How would you know which one?’ She took a left turn and a balloon wafted by the window. ‘Now, let’s hope for a parking space, Tommy. Yell if you see one.’

Tommy squealed at the familiar sign of a party.

‘Well done. There we are, just by the nice red postbox.’

She parked and Donald got out of the car. He fitted his cap back on his head while Janice unstrapped the child. Tommy

looked up at him and smiled with inexplicable delight.

‘You need the . . . pushchair?’ Donald asked Janice.

‘That ’s ok. I can carry him in.’

‘You say your grandfather dedicated a lot of poems?’

‘Hundreds. He loved to make connections. All sorts of famous people he never knew were plonked in. It made him feel good. Part of the scene, you know. ’

‘Oh.’ Donald pondered the prospect of a vast anthology of unclassified names. ‘I suppose I’ll be able to recognise the name. You see, it was a chap from Ceylon. This poet. And Sri Lankan names are quite easy to spot.’

‘You don’t mean Rohan, do you? Rohan Amaratunga?’

‘Amaratunga?’

‘I knew him. He used to come to Grandpa’s house when I was little.’

‘I am Amaratunga.’

‘Obviously not the only one.’

‘Rohan, right?’ He recalled the name of the uncle his father had talked about. ‘A poet?’

‘Yes, he wrote a few poems. Later on he wrote a book about the Crimean War. He married Gertie and became very interested in history. ok, Tommy, ok. Stop pulling my ear. Yes, we are going in. Hang on. Now, what was I saying? Rohan’s book? We had a copy: a whopping big thing. I gave it, along with a set of Grandpa’s poetry books half the size of his, to the library here. You see, they promised to keep an archive of local authors, whatever else they do with videos and

computers and what not. A special reserve collection in the basement or somewhere. You should try to see it.'

'I'd like to. Would you?' The words slipped out before he could stop himself.

She looked at him, startled; Tommy saw something in Donald's cap and wriggled towards it. 'OK, OK,' she said, patting the child.

Donald waited for the clamour to subside, for Tommy and Janice, her grandfather and Rohan, to settle in his head, for the next step to become a little clearer.