

Xhale

By Alan Walsh

We aren't yet far from that self same cigarette machine where I would watch her those first evenings, down among the colonnades. Tonight I've laid her out for perusal. Myself, no shame in it, every bit the vampire and she well on the way, still with some remnant of a pulse though, I think, this being the rub. No matter how fiercely they buck against it, people, to a man, can't but lapse into these, their own little routines. Little repetitions. Pulses, smokes, the same, even the types like this couple were; herself and her friend. Fashioned there, loitering, after what they think bohemia might be.

A grubby, kicked at little cigarette machine, draped heavily in biro scrawled flyers, that they would attend nightly, exorcising their wanton laments at the end of Via Zamboni, another tendril in that singular red, unscrubbed portico labyrinth that wrings itself out dirtily in every direction as our modern Bologna. Chipped at all her rotten edges and sprawled in the peculiarly drowsy fashion of sluggish expectation only possibly explained by the festering legion of show militant students, lounging in cheap cafés and attending cigarette machines when watchers make themselves intentionally more obvious with each passing night.

There were three of said nights. The first; I had already eaten, so it was enough to peer at them from a long way off, looking them over. I'm no dab hand at this yet, though anyone will tell you I've put in the years, still I know enough to say that study is paramount. Dianas they smoked. But quickly, not like true smokers, exhaled for punctuation, you know well the types. That was about all I learned the first night. Oh, and I followed her home. Her flat was ghastly. Paintings of what looked like wombs and an array of flags which must've added up to something. The next night, same place, I casually strutted past with all the whimsy I could muster, or so I would've had it, the cunt I must've seemed. I gladly accepted a cigarette after having had to ask for it twice; the first time gargled through an unclear throat, and having thanked her charmlessly I then strutted on out of sight as if on stage.

So I have taken us here and laid us out, both of us corpses on the slabs. Both of us pallid in keeping with the concrete and me leant over her, toying with her cuffs. It's out back of some stock-house or other such spot where there isn't even grass living to pester us. Me leant over, looking her over. If I was one to breathe then this would've been the hour, I would've collapsed and sunk my lungs with the best of them, but there it is. I'm still waiting for the interruption. She can't be left so for much longer or things start to ripen, but then the night seems so long ahead of me, like it hasn't even started, but I digress, awaiting any spontaneous interruption at all I'll continue about that third night. It was an unmitigated disaster. It began in Grenoble, many more years back than I could be bothered to list, but during one of their bigger wars. I was then, to my present shame, part of running pack, a large group, organised from the remains of those who decided against packing up and showing a clean pair of heels at the first gunshot, the likes of me, never one to allow an opportunity slip. The rich time we did have, you see, scavenging the cadavers out of their mud. It was so hopelessly easy, they're all having been as if offered up to us ready packed in the trenches to be dawdled over and selected for the prime cuts, once cleaned off. It lasted for weeks, uninterrupted, no call for even the slightest guile as reported sightings were chalked up as shellshock and had the witness carted off strapped tightly. That was before

pestilence and the rats made the place unliveable and eventually moved us on. Yes, the third night started there, at this zenith, and deflated sluggishly through the decades to here. It's difficult to pinpoint it myself let alone convey it, but something about the ease of that time, the fast food aspect maybe, brought something home to me, some effect, I know not what, which did like plucking out an eye, robbing me of perspective.

Now, you see I had always been acutely aware of respiration, (to my credit) and could see best of anything: pulses, -couldn't see landscapes for the pulses, and heartbeats too, all of them, in every direction, busily at work, begging at me. Animals, caged birds, fish, presidents and spiders, all pacing themselves diversely so as to be all the easier identified. Or so it could almost have seemed. You can tell people's jobs by their heartbeats. I've often languidly eavesdropped on bickering couples and can pick the unfaithful one just for the distinct lack of pump, and so forth.

Well, a clockmaker can only distinguish his shop from the world when he shuts up in the evening and walks out into the calm. Something akin to this happened in my case. I was stuck after that, after the trenches, albeit gradually, still with the pulses, but with them now also the currents, and the cycles and the tides and the metronomes, and the hours and Ferris wheels and laps and contractions and inhalations demanded in the suffering out of another day/night schedule. Theirs, mine, all the same. Horrible, I'm sure you've already agreed. So it came to pass that I couldn't see the landscapes for the cycles, or for that matter the people in them, no mind their jobs or fidelity, for the cycles, which is no way to be at all, as you can imagine.

The sick existence!! Pulling the deafening metronomes from their cases, as you can imagine also. I was by then teetering on the brink of something. Something desperate, suicide I know not, self harm anyways. So how do they manage tolerating it? I asked myself. Animals obsess themselves with feeding, but what about people. How did I manage it when I was one? The only answer which presented itself in any way clearly was convincing if only for its belligerence. Never the stranger to libraries or cinemas I wasn't one in need of introduction to the excrement that passes for tolerable fiction. People crawling all over one another wetly, or astride each other for the whole three hundred pages, or sentenced to tantalising distance up until the credits. In any case the pattern spoke to me. It was the distraction of taking an interest in one. This is what they all do. Immerse yourself in one, I said, cycles and routines and all. I saw a film once about a woman and a tree in some kind of civil war. Now practically all she did among the acres of carnage was to pretty herself with a view to finding a man. A tidy idea. This, however, is no mere swing of the cat, as we say. Nevertheless I did put it to myself to try.

A local mayor in Rouen in the 50's. Educated, clean, full of life, picky about his food, picky about his dogs' food. But our table conversation was hideous, always jousting opinions, especially politics, which actually interested him! Men are revolting for this, the whole thing was on shaky ground from the off and the food was sickly. You have no idea the digestive complications of someone like me. Taking shits is a fearsome project at the best of times. Let alone when antioxidants and dietary supplements and gastric medicines are mixed in. I would squat for hours hopelessly, furious at myself for letting it go on. It put years on me.

A night watchman in Murcia many years later, pig ignorant but simple and loved his family. A pleasure to talk with nonetheless, but his wife was much the more interesting not to mention immensely physically attractive, so it came to pass we all talked together. Eventually he minded the children while I took his wife out. This all lasted some months, until one night I didn't take her back and couldn't possibly show my face again for the shame. But what skin. In any case this all turned me against the idea until our night in Bologna. I don't care to let you in on the

debauchery which befalls a suicidal character unable to die, but I have recorded it all somewhere, most of it's excruciatingly banal in any case.

I had been in Venice, for the carnival there, and followed a troop of jugglers back to their squat in central Bologna. Stuffed with the stew of them, I took innocent walks around the city for the rest of the night, until passing our bockety cigarette machine, and then, reaching our third night, where I approached the girl properly at last.

I have always mocked the idea of classical romantic love. The untenable poses couples take on park benches and at café windows, herself or himself eventually drawing away an aching arm with all the grace of a planetary collision, told me all I needed to know. This being said, it was all I had left before the final prospect, which was penitence. Yes, I know. So park benches it was. I spoke a mix of dialect to impress her, which hardly worked. 'Why do you smoke those and not these?' 'People here seem friendlier than Venice.' I tried, and other such posturing, which seemed, though, to come off somewhat as her friend faded off somewhere back and she, Tabitha was the name, jeered at me warmly. We arranged a couple of meetings over the next week or so, all of which we both managed to attend. I deadened the urges by draining buskers on their way home, which also afforded me money to try and wean her off all that pertaining to the bohemian, things from Malawi etc, by presenting her with things of the same nature from her own culture, which served the same purposes all in all. Drums etc. This was all every bit as difficult as I'd guessed. She talked long and openly and even made some personal admissions to me the likes of which I could only reciprocate in lies. The interesting thing, though, at least to me, was that through it all there were only the slight twinges of an inclination to surge on forward into her jugular. These tended to come at pauses in the conversation or when introduced to another friend or when she would refuse to explain something sufficiently or when she would offer me some unwanted advice on something like hygiene. At one stage she put it to me: "why the fuck do you stink so much? Don't you have a shower in your place?" another time: "your shoelaces don't need to be that long, is it supposed to be trendy? You can cut them at two points in the centre and then tie these together, make them shorter, do you see mine?"

Her flatmates were completely insufferable however. They drank cheap scotch and watched the news endlessly. Their rooms were daubed in prints of people like Chagall and Kandinsky. They seemed to eat round the clock. Nevertheless I was made sit at the communal kitchen table under the blinding bulb and listen to the feeble historical analysis of some Guess wearing runt not even fit to clean my hole with and instead of assuming my full height and vomiting straight into his face, as I would have done under less pressing circumstances, or at least let go at him with some eye witness accounts of mutual cannibalism or some grandiose battle hero who shat himself noiselessly in the preamble, I propped my head on my fist and tried not to sigh all that hard.

She is a singular looking girl. Seeming by her face in a state of continuous agitation with the world, all tucked into a gnarled up frown, pinched at the nose, beneath a spewing mop, for want of better definition, of unkempt black tresses, scraped back off of her forehead irregularly. I am a lucky man that I can distinguish the internal rhythms also and all but watch the bolus of her chewed food make its merry way through her gullet and present itself for acidic breaking down. I can and do listen to the sinews and ligaments wrought tight and slack in her walking ankles, the damp patches across her back and sometimes it's not too much to say that there arises in me need to have these things, that is, first hand, to excavate them and gorge for appreciation. Which was why I put off fucking her for so long, despite the accusations.

I wasn't completely sure how. People, it has always seemed to me, tend to conduct themselves in the bedroom just as if anywhere else, that is to say in a slow to middling throb. The spectre of addressing Tabitha in a slow to middling throb turned my stomach. Firstly, vampiric consensual sex does not exist; in that startling attacks are launched, like those by hunting cats on African planes, seizing the subject from behind and toppling them into submission until hierarchy is fixed. This is the same for both sexes should the distinction arise. Penetration is almost a mere aftermath, if it even occurs, to the frenzied flesh gouging and orgasmic distress that ensues. I have been peeled clean open time and again. For some reason people seem to like to do this to me. It is not wild in the sense of people mimicking animals; it is in the sense of mutually corrosive toxins mixed. To be honest, I have always found it a little embarrassing, so hyperactive, so asking, but there it is. Nor are there limits on the number of participants. But this is not the place to say all that. My point was how to propose any of this to a young Italian girl.

In the end the act took place as she preferred and it was foisted on me to heave and contract coinciding with all her imposed rhythms. Not that it was completely without its certain charm. The difference in her bodily palpitations, when compared to the norm, was almost a source of erotic excitement. I say almost. It was shrill. I have tried to think of similes but there aren't any. In any case, not to fall into the trap of endless sexual ramblings I'll progress. Or at least in a moment. It did occur after all, that to pull this off I would have to derive at least some material pleasure from it. There was a pleasure in caressing her knees, which were grazed raw pink from crawling around after a young child for a job she had found. I had to make do with that. In any case what was clear was that it all lead to my coming clean at some point, lest the whole thing descend into sham.

This would take tact the calibre of which was obviously well beyond me. I considered hoisting her up on a roof with me. Ripping into a cat in front of her. I asked her which person she would most wish disappeared with the aim of following through. It's not like she didn't know something was up. I had told her I worked early nights and slept days, at an unnamed butcher's on the city fringes. Doesn't that sound preposterous to you? I certainly wouldn't have believed it. I would have also bolted at the first nights vomiting after my trying to consume a chicken meal, let alone the others. Would this, then, be how it finished up? Presumably. Little enough I had to offer in any final reckoning. I took her to a promontory and explained to her as tactfully as I could that everything she knew was so much horseshit crumbling in the spring breeze and all the regulations that had taken her thus far in her life could happily be abandoned. She digested this remarkably well, aside from a brief political rant and a wayward analysis I couldn't quite grasp, on Caravaggio and other debased artists. All this broached, I leant in and kissed her almost as I had always wanted. Which is to say, I invaded her though at no stage puncturing anything, I seized her tongue, and her throat, and fastened the organic percussion of her head in thrall, down to the veins, and manoeuvred it all in a rising tide of what can only be described as violence right at this moment, or an assault, as it would have looked. Of prime importance, naturally, was my not drawing any blood at all. A morsel and that would've been it. Thrashing in all the way and finding a place for the corpse. Even just being in there drew thoughts of the fleshy cheeks, the tendons yawning to receive. But it was alright. Sometimes, thankfully, I manage to rise to the occasion. Naturally though I was used to being assaulted back and thus the moment had its novelty for me, also for that touch of delicacy I would have to apply in the withdrawal. This was probably the one moment in almost a century that I had found myself an optimist. There are no sure things, but the notion that I would pull gently away and find her rapt didn't seem inconceivable. In fact I loosed my grip and she collapsed in giggles back onto the grass, actually

kicking the air. Never the one for tender moments I settled down beside her and laughed too for want of any other option. It must be noted though that throughout all this I was congratulating myself on the suppression of all those tides of desire which added up to my tearing off her head. This is a constant ebb which never seems to leave me. Nor does the one which tells me I am constantly in the company of so much ripe meat.

It would be too much to say things went well from there. But they went anyway. Naturally she was extremely curious. "Why won't you fucking well let me watch sometime," she would say, putting it to me delicately despite the tone to decide if she was up for it. So eventually I did, after a certain degree of bravado from herself. I knew it would be risky, but at the time there came and went moments where it mattered hugely and then not at all if she stayed with me. I only confess this now because it's embarrassing, and seems out of step with the train of thought. Almost indifferent to her presence that night we took a taxi driver well, well out of his range and I opened him up inside his car. It was perhaps going a little too far to address the endeavour like a television chef, but so it went. I fed hungrily and she shrieked endlessly but never once attempted to intervene or even leave the car. She did bring up how detrimental it was for the longevity of my clothes though, nightly cakings in blood. But on the whole was nothing near as hysterical as she sounded. Instead, she requested to be there the following night too, which I obliged easily. She quietened herself for that. In no time she was the transfixed spectator at all my meals. I can't think what was the more disturbing for the prey, the being drained or gaped at by some third party. They would thrash their heads around frantically and catch this visage of the girl, removed as if on the other side of a TV screen, scratching her ankle or some such thing. Eventually she put it to me, though. To make her like myself or fuck off. Or words to that extent. Which is what has us here, naturally.

Now, events like these will usually wind up badly. Of this I had always been aware. Have you ever heard otherwise? Yet here she is corpsed out for me willingly. Pale, and the calm moves over her. It's only a matter of dampening her mouth with a little red. She might love it all. I know I did. In all the time I've known her she's never looked exactly beautiful, per say, so it winds up this is as close as she gets. Her limbs have left her, the way the tips of the hair leave the host to conduct themselves off abstractly, and her wrists are folding her loose hands in. She looks balmy and sullen. She seems just another obstacle for the wind. I had assumed it was earlier but I think I may just have heard the first of the busses. It's not that I'm having second thoughts in any conventional sense. It's simply that she seems to have jettisoned everything she had for me, or near enough, and me having nothing whatever to jettison at any stage, there seems an imbalance running. Or is this just the melodramatic shit talk of a dawdler? Wait, I jettisoned my flirtation with pornography! Something to chalk down indeed. And my shoelaces are much different.

I talk and talk as if I don't know what's happened. I am sometimes struck with the ingenuity of my own self delusion. How it ascribes in the end to teach me lessons. I pretend to myself I didn't notice the heart stop when it did. It can't exactly be said that this has ended badly though. I'm sure I'll be able to extract some sense of progress from some corner of it. This is the kind of occasion one would never tell anyone about, though. She has died under my watch, that much is true, and so, no going back, there is work to get done and then also some to be abandoned. Where to dump her being prime. At the same time, having actually noticed that longed for final pulse, last thump, successively delayed and delayed, I have to admit I was charmed into a stupor watching it go. Arresting thing it turned out, in the end.