

BALTIC BLUE

“Keep yourself to yourself”, she had said.

“Don’t laugh at others and they won’t laugh at you”.

His mother’s words were not exactly strictures; more guidelines within which a shell might grow, harden and iron-plate his difference. He understood. Whatever the words, he knew that ‘don’t laugh at others’ was a prayer on her part and that not to smile was part of its hope. And he grew into the mould.

When spoken to, he would incline his head, look thoughtful and answer slowly and gravely. To digress was offside. When laughter spoke to him he kept it inside, bottled and stored for future privacy. Not to smile was more difficult but he mastered it. He could, with a series of small bows of the chin and deft use of the eyebrows, convey that he was laughing with people, never at them. And there came a time when he had crafted the repertoire into a formidable shield. And the shield seemed strong and effective; as strong and effective as the granite boulders, the wave-breaks, between the beach and the promenade above.

He kept himself to himself and, in the library, gathered information, stored it and filed it in his head. But it was the beach which became his haven, his real academy, his universe. The smell of the sea, the moods of the mountain, the always moving sand dunes beyond where the river dissected the beach; these were the channels that washed the information into knowledge and understanding, that carried the colour, pain and music of life.

On the rocks between the beach and the harbour, he watched a fisherman. The man had his right arm extended in a straight line with a pole and net at the end of it. The arm and the pole were as rigid and solid as the mountain above but the net was a silent convulsion of movement and colour. A fish within the net shimmered in great curves, bends and flows. The fluidity of the movement

and the speed of glinting wet colours made the net seem invisible. It was as if the fish was suspended in a great, beautiful mid-air ballet. The boy sat beyond the rocks and, with an aching fascination, watched the dance of death. The movements slowed, faded and eventually stopped. Only when the fish had become a slumped weight did the man release his arm.

The boy turned and headed for home. His head was heavy with the music of movement and his body leaned to one side, as if being pulled down by an anchor that had slipped.

Sometimes at low tide, he made his way beyond the river to the small dunes of sand. From here, he would sit and look beyond the bay to the lighthouse. At night time, its light flashed across the water with a sequence which he had learnt to count. On days when the sky and sea were of the clearest blue he could see it — black and yellow — at the end of the curved land. Even when the bay and sky turned salt-grey, he knew where it was. Day or night, he felt, it was a fingered signpost to the rest of the world.

Between the dunes and the sea he collected shells. Sometimes he picked them up when they had already dried into faded, crusty colours. But the best times were when he stood and watched as the water receded and washed the ones encased in the sand. Polished whites, greys, orange and multi-speckled ones would flash up, fleetingly. He would crouch forward and his right hand would dart down and deftly pull out a shell of his choice. One afternoon he spotted a blue one — it wasn't just any blue! It was the blue of the sky in summer. It was the sea that you saw on the postcards. It was.....it was something special, something different. It was.....he just knew there had to be a word for the colour and the laughter that was dancing inside him.

He picked it up and quickly put it in his pocket. When he brought it home, it had already dried and lost its lustre. But he had plans. With a small paint brush, he coated it delicately with varnish and

watched as the blue returned. In his bedroom, he placed it in the window that looked down over the harbour. He smiled and the smile was as full and wide as the moon when it shone on the bay.

Within a week, the varnish cloyed, yellowed and the blue became a stained, grey-veined distortion. He threw the shell away but he wrapped the colour in a smile and kept it deep within.

One day in the library he saw a painting entitled 'Ships of The Baltic'. Around the ships it looked as if the sea had been purified by ice and sunshine into a special blue — a special, perfect blue! And he knew that the word had come to him. The word was 'baltic' and the colour he had wrapped in his head was baltic-blue.

In July, the holidaymakers from the city filled the guesthouses and the caravans and their noise and colour raced through the town. On the promenade, groups of holidaying girls would congregate around the bandstand and, in accents that were noisy and different, volunteer to perform.

"A forward lot", his mother called them.

On a Saturday afternoon he watched a Junior Talent Competition. Suddenly, a group of city girls wrapped him in giggles, whisked him up the steps and thrust him out onto the stage.

"He wants to take part, Mister", one of them announced, before they retreated in a laughing group.

The MC hesitated and then relented:

"What can you do? Sing?"

The promenade began to shrink and tighten like a net around him. The faces of the crowd grew bigger and closer - storm clouds, ominous and blocking out the bay. With his breath tightening, he looked around for an escape that didn't exist. And then he saw it. A silver coated drum-set. In desperation he pointed towards it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, a drummer boy”, the man announced, with a flourish of relief.

A few adults clapped encouragement and the girls sniggered. He raised the sticks in the air, froze, and then.....and then the waves whispered. The breeze carried the vibrations into his body, the sticks became part of it and he remembered the fisherman's arm. And he drummed. He gathered the sound of the waves and built them into the anger of the sea. Faster he went and faster. The stick in his right hand raced and smashed into the silver as if to devour it. The noise of the drums was the fury of the winter storms that lashed and crashed over the wall of the South promenade. In his head, he could hear the cry that the waves needed to turn back but the stick in his left hand couldn't answer the call. And then the fury took over and his drumming became wild and savage. He hammered as if trying to smash an iron-plated shell from within; he thundered out all the things he had read and heard. He tried to force-feed the noise into the music of the laughter he knew and, in a wild-eyed crescendo of rage, he drummed to show them the colour of baltic-blue.

But it was futile. The realisation seeped through his sweat like soiled floodwater and the drumming slumped and collapsed like the fish in the net.

When his mother heard about it, she spoke to someone behind the scenes and assurances were given. They were unnecessary; he knew his childhood had ended.

II

As a teenager, he slipped into a behind-the-scenes supporting role in the working life of the promenade. In the dancehall, the cinema and the various amusement arcades, he sorted chairs, released jammed machines and solved problems before they emerged. His hours and location were casual and fluid but he filed times and places in his head and was never late. When the music finished on the bandstand on summer nights, it was he who disconnected the power supply and tidied up.

“He is dependable, causes no bother and keeps himself to himself”, said the owner of an amusement arcade when recommending him for some temporary or menial task.

When the weather encouraged it, he would watch the sunrise. Beyond the lighthouse, the sun would sit momentarily and then, as if suddenly released, it would ski in a dazzle of light across the bay, with a shadow racing in front of it. Over the promenade, across the scarf of fir trees beyond, up and over the mountain the shadow bolted, leaving the sea, the town and the mountain united as one in the brilliance of sunshine. But no matter how often he watched, the sun always left a blackspot, an aberration, where it couldn't penetrate the disused quarry on the side of the mountain. It jarred his sense of beauty, like a missing tooth in a welcoming smile. A gaping injustice.

For a while he flirted with salvation. He watched on summer evenings as gospel groups assembled close to the War Memorial and gave witness to how they had abandoned the evils of the world and become saved. Healed in the words of God. Sometimes the speakers were smooth and practised. They painted fiery pictures of damnation and contrasted them with the glories awaiting those who, like themselves, were ‘safe in the arms of Jesus’. At other times, the responsibility for ‘spreading the word’ fell on locals who were ill-at-ease, self-conscious and aware of the eyes and ears of their neighbours. They were the ones who were more at ease handing out

leaflets door-to-door and talking to their listeners one-to-one. They promised the sinner, the weak and the lame a glorious homecoming. A harvest of outsiders. On the promenade, the testimonies were interspersed with gospel music, and affirmations of 'Amen ' and 'Praise the Lord'.

On a balmy evening, he watched a local businessman with a reputation for sharp practice affirm how he had made his peace with the Saviour. For support he had an accordion player, a handful of ladies in twinsets and two young women who handed out gospel leaflets. One of the girls held a tambourine and moved it lightly. The preacher's voice lacked confidence and his story lacked conviction. To fortify his performance, he would cry out at intervals:

"I saw the light and I walked towards it."

On his third reference to the light, he illustrated with an extravagant sweep of his arm towards the bay.

"That's the lighthouse", a young man's voice scoffed back from the promenade.

A group of young men on vacation were leaning casually against the wall. The man glared at them, but continued, and his annoyance strengthened his voice:

"I walked towards the light, ignoring all distractions, ignoring all temptations and then....."

"You got your feet wet", the young man shouted.

A titter ran through the crowd and the young girl held the tambourine across her face to deflect a smile. One of the supporting ladies, not fully following the exchange of words, chimed in with an ill-timed affirmation:

"Hallelujah. Praise the Lord", she shrieked excitedly as if three more souls had been landed.

The tittering exploded into laughter. The preacher gave up and turned to music.

"*Shall we gather at the River*", he instructed sideways to the accordion player. The man was old, slow limbed and hadn't been expecting to play so soon. He fumbled with the straps on his shoulders and stumbled into two false starts.

"If you don't get a move on, the boat will leave without you".

The young man had the crowd in his hands and was resolved to entertain them. The musician lost all composure and the growing crowd on the promenade roared with laughter. In a last attempt to save the evening, the preacher nodded to the girl with the tambourine and cried out as if in anguish:

“Let’s sing the hymn for all of us who are saved and for all those who want to be saved. Let’s sing — ‘*I saw the Light*.’”

The singing was faint and disjointed and lacked the power to hold the crowd. One of the young men suddenly bounded forward and, in a voice pure with confidence, he sang. His singing was rich and full and washed over the promenade as if cleansing for God. And he sang the gospel song as if it had travelled all the way from Hank Williams, across the sea and past the lighthouse just for this moment. His two friends came in and, with arms above their heads, they clapped their hands and cried out at intervals -

“Sing it brother, Praise the Lord, Amen.”

For a moment, it seemed as if a genuine harvest had been reaped and three more souls were to be landed. But then the singer changed tone and tempo. In a few seconds, the hymn became a rock-rendition — powerful, raucous and irreverent — and the gospel group was left trailing in its wake. When they had finished, the three young men bowed to the girl with the tambourine in deference to her beauty and laughed their way towards the bandstand.

About a week later, he was on the edge of the crowd at the bandstand when he noticed the two girls from the gospel group. They were standing across from him, a few yards back from the ring of onlookers, tapping their feet to the music. The girl with the tambourine scanned the crowd with exaggerated casualness. On open space to the front of the bandstand, a group of girls, mostly holidaymakers, danced. The local girls watched their men watching them. As the summer light faded, the number of dancing girls grew and spread out until the two gospel girls were immersed. And then the girl danced.

With the tambourine held in front of her, she slid into the music and became part of it. Her feet kept within a small circle at first but then the others made space for her and then she really danced. She danced as if her dress and body were one; as if no nets could constrict her and all the time with a beauty and elegance that belonged to somewhere different, somewhere greater than the concrete floor of a promenade. The singer in the band sang directly at her and she closed her eyes and slowly moved the tambourine away from her breast. With delicate wrist movements she lifted the tambourine high above her head and danced as if she had removed a last veil of gossamer. The singer burned into a hit song of the summer and the crowd circled around her, singing the chorus. She danced and, in the closing of daylight, the tambourine gleamed like a halo over her head.

When the song ended, she lowered the tambourine and scanned the crowd for a face she couldn't find. She bit her lower lip, edged her way backwards from the crowd and, in seconds, was gone like a flamingo in the night.

But the crowd was alive and together and wanted to hold on to the moment. The band felt their mood and, for a finale, lifted them into a soul song recorded by a blind singer.

The song was familiar to them and they rowed in from the start as if they were part of a great gospel choir but singing for the present.

"I can't stop loving you", the singer's voice washed over them and they rushed in, pouring their individual hopes, dreams and fears into a great collective offering. And their singing was of what had been, might be but above all what was now. They were not singing for salvation; they were young and they were singing their soul. They sang behind the singer and then with him:

"They say that time will heal a broken....."

They sang as if they could mend anything or anyone and their voices rose above the place where they stood. And then the singer handed them the lead in the song and they took their singing and stripped it of all differences. The accents of town and city disappeared and the band, the singer

and the crowd were a single voice. The song was their testimony that this moment in this place would never again exist and they sang to hold it as long as possible.

“Those happy hours, that we once knew.....”

Their voice deepened and filled the air with the inevitability of farewell. As night closed in, the mountain to one side of the bay and the sand dunes to the other, seemed to close their arms around the group of singers and the sea held its breath. On the fringe of the crowd he stood as straight as he could and sang that he might belong.

When the crowd left, he moved forward and helped the band gather up their equipment. He scanned the area around the bandstand for discarded cigarette packets which sometimes had unclaimed coupons that could be saved towards a prize. He found four and expertly flicked them open. With deft movements of his fingers, he pulled back the silver wrapping paper to check was there anything behind it. He found nothing. Before he disconnected the electricity, the lights picked up on the silver papers and they flickered like the zils of a tambourine.

At the end of the summer the local paper carried a report about how the girl from the gospel group had committed herself to a life as a missionary in East Africa. The report carried a photograph. There was no mention of music or dance, but even in black and white it was clear she had the body of a dancer.

In November, the same paper carried an obituary for his mother. Before she died, she had made arrangements and when the following summer season came to the promenade, he had gone.

“Somewhere in the North of England”, said the owner of the arcade when asked.

“Relatives of his mother”, he added. “I had a letter asking for a reference and was happy to oblige.”

III

“You can come and go as you like. Some people mix a lot, others keep themselves to themselves”, the warden of the Sheltered Housing Complex explained as he welcomed him. “I’m sure you’ll find some changes”, he added, moving his hand with a backward wave in the direction of the promenade and the sea.

Four decades had brought change. Like the intervening years, the sand on the beach had drifted away. Other changes were man-made. Money from Europe had transformed the townscape. New wave walls, inclined steel railings, and seats matched in metal and wood had brought a look of modernity. Lights set high in swing-boat shaped holders defined the new promenade which opened up the town and sea to each other. The bandstand had gone, replaced by a great shining orb of steel, but, when you looked over the water, the bay was still in the arms of the mountain and the sand dunes.

On his first night back, he stood and watched as the beam from the lighthouse flashed over the water. He thought of all the places that the signpost had taken him to and then he counted the flashes. The sequence hadn’t changed.

Shortly after his return, he took a walk towards the sand dunes, beyond where the river joined the sea. In the evening light, the new pedestrian bridge hung above the water like a great half-opened oyster shell; a delicate shape, taut and secure in the cold strength of steel. On the boulders below the bridge, two young men sat drinking from beer cans. With them, a girl lounged, holding a fat cider bottle with both hands. They looked up and saw him.

“Piss off, weirdo”, one of the men shouted in a thickly-slurred voice.

On the bridge, he trailed his body into a slow turn to head back.

“Pervo!”, the girl’s voice spat after him. The injustice of the words stung like salt water in a wound, like the pain of a gash from a broken bottle buried in sand.

After the episode at the bridge, he didn’t travel as far. He slipped back into the old triangle of home, library and promenade. He spent more time in the library and, on the internet, revisited all the places he had been to. On the promenade, he walked less and sat more. His body burdened him and he kept himself to the open area close to the great steel orb.

Two years after his return, a winter freeze locked the town in an iced December grip. On Christmas morning, he sat on a promenade seat and looked at how the snow had painted out the quarry on the face of the mountain. The aberration had gone and all was white, a perfect white.

A group of young foreign workers approached the shining orb, laughing and chatting in their own language. He knew it was Polish. A young girl from the group approached him.

“We wish you would take the photograph of us for Christmas”, she asked in careful English. He bowed his compliance and she reached him a digital camera.

“Stand exactly where I say so I can backdrop the mountain”, he said slowly, and his voice was as careful as her own. She spoke the instructions to the others and then he stood up. He shuffled into position and, with a series of arm and head movements, he assembled the group as he knew it needed to be. And then, with the camera secure in his right hand, he painted them into the photograph and into the mountain that smiled behind them. When he handed the camera back to the girl, she showed the image to the rest of the group and they smiled and talked their delight. “It is so beautiful this place”, she said. “We all wish to thank you so much. We shall keep the photograph and the moment for always”. He bowed his acceptance and walked away.

In September sunshine, he sat watching power-walkers. With their arms pumping like pistons they pounded the promenade, marching, unsmiling as if to right some great wrong. And then he saw

her, an elegant lady, grey haired and straight backed. She carried a newspaper under her left arm and held an apple in her right hand. She walked smoothly and lightly.....like a dancer! And he knew it was her.

When she came close to the orb, she scanned the area and then peered, as through a sea mist. She sat down gracefully and held the apple in front of her face. With delicate movements of her wrist, she turned the apple as if it should answer, as if it was a tambourine. After a few moments, she stood up and stared towards the sea. She turned back in the direction she had come from and then appeared to change her mind. As her confusion grew, her grace of movement trailed away like a damaged wing, a broken flamingo. Two care workers from a local nursing home appeared and gently led her away. One of them was the young Polish girl and she waved in recognition. When they had gone, he crossed over to the seat where she had sat and lifted the discarded newspaper. It was two weeks old.

One evening as he made his way off the promenade, he met the young Polish girl. She had a young man with her and she stopped as if she had something important to say:

“This is Gregior and he is from Gdańsk”, she smiled as her tongue and mouth wrapped lovingly around the two words native to her.

“And this is the man who took the photograph I sent to you”, she completed the introduction as she looked towards her companion.

“And your name?”, the young man asked with careful politeness.

“Elmer”, he replied, giving both syllables clearly, and they shook hands. He bowed and moved on. At the traffic lights, he waited for the green signal. From a cafe across the street, came a popular song of the summer just gone.

“Lets Marvin Gaye and get it on.....” the singer’s voice pleaded. Elmer looked back over his shoulder and the young couple waved. They had their heads held back and were singing to the

music from across the street; they were singing their togetherness, telling the whole promenade they were living the song.

He turned towards the lights, and the smile with which he had wrapped the colour in his head all those years ago unravelled, unleashing the beauty of a rainbow. And the colours danced like the sunrise that skied over summer morning water and his smile burst out from within. But the smile was broken and loose and fell to the left side of his face and into the weakened side of his body; an unhinged door of a kitchen cupboard, a distortion of baltic-blue.

At the light opposite, a woman stood with a young child. As the green light flashed to go, she saw his smile and quickly transferred the child to her outside hand. He saw the movement and he knew the prayer of his mother. He switched off the smile and buried the colours in the void that lay inside him; a void as deep, dark and cavernous as the quarry that loomed in the mountain above. As he passed the woman he bowed politely but she averted her eyes.

From the cafe, the singer's voice was being accompanied by that of a woman:

"Lets Marvin Gaye and get it on.

You got the healing that I want, just like they say it in the song....."

As he rounded the corner, the words called to him. The sound was retro and echoed from way back and deep within. It was the music of all his summers; blue shells on a childhood beach, the beauty of sunrise and dance, the hope of that night when he sang that he might belong. And all of them nothing, nothing but wrappers. Silver wrappers amidst the debris of a dance floor.

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