

CLOSER THAN BREATHING

A Light Gay Odyssey

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One

On Thursday night, as usual, I called in at the Give and Take, a West London gay bar a short walk from home. Obvious shadows under my eyes, caused by lack of sleep, might have invited comment, so I put on a pair of sunglasses. They were the kind that magically darken in bright light. I had bought them that summer, and I wore them hoping, even if it was now the middle of October, that they would conceal my tiredness. Sunglasses go well with thick, dark hair like mine anyway.

The Give and Take is not a late bar. I go there to chat with friends rather than to pick someone up – an activity the barman Miles calls ‘looking for take-away’. His nickname is Smiles, because he can flash one that would cheer up a funeral.

‘You okay, Ben? What’s with the dark glasses?’ he asked, pouring me a lager. ‘Been clubbing? Too much take-away?’

‘Neither. Neighbours kept me awake. Should have known the dark glasses wouldn’t fool anyone.’

‘The bastards. You hear some terrible stories about nuisance neighbours. Mind you, hiding your black eyes behind sunglasses is a bit transparent,’ he said, flashing that smile. ‘Glasses... bit transparent... get it?’

‘You can laugh. Perhaps I should stay away from the bar lights, and hide in the dark corners.’

‘We don’t have any dark corners – anyway, that’s not your style, is it? Let me know if you’re interested in moving. I know someone who’s looking for a flatmate.’

Another customer arrived and Smiles went to serve him. Offering to put me in touch with someone who wanted a flatmate was typical of Smiles, who always knew someone or something that would solve everyone’s problems. However, the earplugs I picked up during my lunch break promised to be a less drastic solution than moving home. Anyway I had shared a flat before, after university, a couple of years ago, when I first came up to London. The flat share was good in some ways, but eight months had been long enough. My current self-contained little place might be cramped and two floors up, in what my boss, Jeremy, described as a dreary Victorian terrace, but it was my release from taking turns with four others to use the bathroom and kitchen. Sharing had meant not needing to go out in search of company, but having more privacy – a few quiet hours to myself whenever I wanted – had been a big improvement.

Until the previous weekend, that is, when new neighbours moved in upstairs. On Monday night the noise of heavy objects being shifted around continued until after midnight. The next night a series of rhythmic thuds hammered through the ceiling into the early hours with nothing that, from below, sounded like a tune. I guessed that they had unpacked and were celebrating their move, so I put the covers over my head and tried to sleep, but soon felt too hot. I pushed the bedding aside, put my head under the pillow, and dozed uncomfortably as the minutes dragged by. Wednesday night, with their noise again in my ears after midnight, the racket annoyed me so much that sleep was impossible. I went up to ask them to turn the music down, banging ever more loudly on their door until a young woman wearing garish lipstick, her eyelashes also plastered with make-up, answered.

'I'm from downstairs...'

'Oh, you're one of the neighbours. Nice to meet you, like. Come on in for a drink.'

Despite my anger, meeting her for the first time and wanting to be civil, I went in. She introduced her partner, who welcomed me with an energetic handshake. Her name was Jayde and his was Jake. Everyone, she said, called them the Jays. Stupidly I let him pour me a large beer. We chatted about the rents we were paying, and moaned about the three months deposit required by the landlord. They asked if I lived on my own or with a girlfriend, so I told them I was gay. With no hesitation they both said that was great, and she joked that instead of him worrying about me fancying her, she was the one who would have to worry about me fancying him. 'You have to admit I've picked myself a looker, haven't I?'

Not sure of how to turn the conversation to the subject of noise, I smiled vaguely.

'There you are you see. Read your mind!' she said, shrieking with laughter. 'Oh dear! Have to have a bit of fun, like, don't you?'

Beer in hand, my half-hearted attempts to complain had no effect on them. When I left an hour later, they had ignored what I said about their music keeping me awake. I was seething – angry mostly with myself for not being more assertive.

Everyone has nights when their sleep is disturbed. Why should a bit of noise become such a problem for me? If you are tired enough you can probably sleep anywhere. It was not as though I was likely to fall asleep on my stool at Smile's bar and fall off onto the floor.

When Smiles had finished serving he came back over to me. 'Well? This guy I mentioned, looking for a flatmate. You might get on. He's a steady type, like you. The flat's really nice, you should see it.'

'A steady type? Me? Why? Because I work in a bookshop? Jeremy would be most put out to hear his shop spoken of as a place for steady types. He would have you know that the two of us are the cutting edge of antiquarian book retail, not to say at the coal face.'

'Ah, Jeremy... how is the old thing? Still wearing his Sherlock Holmes costume?' he teased, referring to a very old-fashioned cape Jeremy sometimes wore. 'You and Jeremy, the fearless duo of historic parchments, you pair of daredevils.'

He knew perfectly well that we sold books, not historic parchments. 'Here's someone who must be a bit parched,' I said, nodding towards another regular who had come up to the bar.

I went home at eleven o'clock. All was quiet and by half past I had got into bed. After two nights short of sleep I dropped off straight away. An hour or so later the thud of the loudspeaker upstairs woke me. Should I go up to protest? What if they welcomed me as fervently as before? Easy to tell myself to be more forceful, but hampered by lack of sleep, would they shrug away my complaints as easily a second time? If so, and were I to be swept along by their matey banter again, things would be worse than ever. To try to forget the whole issue I put in the earplugs and slept fitfully until after three when the noise at last stopped.

Getting ready for work at seven-thirty the next morning, I saw in the bathroom mirror that the shadows under my eyes were developing into bags. The dark glasses were my only hope; given Jeremy's unconventional dress he was unlikely to take much notice of a pair of not-all-that-dark-really glasses.

This was wishful thinking, for he commented on them straight away, attributing my tired eyes to too much reading. He himself had been working his way through the collected works of the historian Thomas Carlyle, and at times would lapse into a paternalistic manner of speech: 'Those of us who love books must learn not to over-indulge,' he counselled, nodding his head. 'As I've learned through hard experience over the years, excessive reading puts a strain on the eyes. If we do not allow adequate time for sleep, how can the mind take in what is being presented to it, however fine the words? Now you mustn't think I am trying to lecture you, but be firm, Ben. No reading into the early hours tonight.'

He went out to collect some stock acquired through an online book auction, leaving me in charge. As the shop was empty I placed a chair by the door and sat dozing with a book open in my lap. When

you are really tired, catching a minute or two of sleep makes you feel much better, and the rest helped even though I woke up a couple of times in danger of falling over sideways.

Jeremy returned about an hour later. The door latch clicked and the shop bell rang. He was carrying a box of magazines, and as he manoeuvred himself through the entrance I stirred myself and quickly climbed onto the chair to tidy the valuable old atlases on a high shelf nearby.

‘Why are you using a chair to do that, Ben? You should use the steps, much safer, and easier. It’s because you’re over-tired. I wouldn’t have been at all surprised to have come back and found you having a nap.’

Could he have guessed the real reason the chair was there? To divert him from any suspicious thoughts, I asked ‘Anything interesting from the auction?’

‘Oh, just some old *HIM* magazines.’ Or rather that is what I thought he said, wrongly guessing he meant the gay soft porn magazine from the nineteen-seventies. I asked to have a look.

‘You won’t find these of any interest, they’re not what you imagine. *Hymn* magazines were a nineteen-thirties Church of England series dealing with church governance. The only potential buyers are specialised archivists. Sorry to disappoint you. Cup of tea instead?’

Meticulous about keeping his stock records up to date, he had me help him make a note of the issue numbers and dates of the magazines while we drank our tea. We had almost finished when the shop bell rang.

‘You go, Ben, I’ll finish this off.’

I left Jeremy’s little office and went to stand by the till, ready to make a sale. A man about my age or a bit older, tall and fair, tidily dressed in good casual clothes, walked towards me and said, ‘Excuse me, are you Ben?’

‘Yes.’

‘Miles from the Give and Take suggested I drop in on you. I’m Dale. I’ve a flat not far from here. I’m hoping to find someone to share.’

‘Were you at the Give and Take? I don’t remember... You’re a friend of Smiles?’

‘I met him through an old boyfriend.’

‘Aah...’ I explained my problem with the new neighbours, but said I did not intend to be terrorized out of my flat.

He shrugged. ‘Do you have a lunch break? Why not have a quick look at my place anyway. I’m in Fulrose Court... wouldn’t take long... it’s a really nice building and, who knows, one day you might think about a move.’

One of the words to which Jeremy’s hearing is highly sensitive is ‘lunch’. He emerged from the back of the shop wearing a bright yellow jacket, the cloth stretched very tight over his tummy. Dale did not know what to say.

Jeremy smiled. ‘You’ve noticed my jacket. There used to be a jazz band that played in the Gay Pride rallies; the five members each had differently coloured jackets, rainbow colours being the idea, I suppose. Some while ago I saw all five for sale in a charity shop and bought them. I assumed they once belonged to the jazz band, I don’t really know.’

‘They must have made quite a splash at the rallies,’ Dale commented.

‘Jeremy would be willing to lend you one, if you like,’ I offered.

‘He’s making fun of me. I’ll be here if you want to go out for lunch. Bring me back a sandwich and a piece of cake.’

This made it impossible for me to give Dale the excuse that I could not leave the shop, and despite not having any real wish to see his flat I found myself on my way there with him. While we were waiting in the sandwich bar he said, ‘I’m putting you out, aren’t I? Your boss must have thought me rude, staring at him. That jacket...’

‘He thinks it’s good for business, that putting on unusual clothes will make customers remember the

shop. He has his quirks. Nice to get out for lunch, actually. How far away did you say your flat was?

We walked for another fifteen minutes before arriving at the stylish white façade of a block of flats about eight floors high. Two wings containing shops came forward on either side of the main entrance to make a little open square. The corners of the building were curved rather than right-angled, and below the roof was a frieze with a motif of overlapping circles. ‘There it is. What do you think?’ he asked.

‘They’re luxury flats all right. A bit upmarket for me.’ Inside the ornate bronze panels decorated with chevrons and semicircles on the lift doors reinforced this impression. ‘How old is it?’

‘Nineteen-thirties. It’s period architecture.’

He lived on the fourth floor. ‘I’ll show you round quickly while the kettle’s boiling. It’s plenty big enough for two. This is my bedroom. The other is the same size.’ The rooms were large and well lit, nicely furnished— nothing was showy but everything matched. In the kitchen was a small table where we ate our sandwiches.

‘Do you work locally?’

‘I’m a manager at the local hospital. The pay is... well, public sector rates, not fantastic. I’ve quite a big mortgage to pay for this place. My salary covers it, but I need a flatmate to help with the taxes and bills. I was sharing with someone, a boyfriend. We split up a few months ago.’

‘Have you tried advertising?’ My lack of interest disappointed him and he looked glum, or more accurately, glummer than ever; he had not smiled once since we met. The fault, though, might have been mine. Being pressed into seeing his flat made me awkward.

‘There are always risks if you share with someone you don’t know,’ he replied. He gave me the impression of being uneasy with strangers. If so, finding a new flatmate would be hard for him.

‘We don’t really know each other, do we?’

‘We could get to know one another, you wouldn’t need to decide right away. Miles says you’re steady.’

‘What is all this about me being steady? Alfred the Great, Ethelred the Unready, and Ben the Steady?’

This remark, meant to be humorous, made him smile for a moment, but then he must have thought he had annoyed me by calling me ‘steady’, and his brow sank back into a frown. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean it to sound like you were no one special. Stupid of me. I’m sorry.’

‘No, don’t... Honestly, I really do have to go back to feed Jeremy his sandwich. I go to Smiles’ bar most Thursdays, and often a couple of other evenings during the week, usually from about nine. Can I see you in there some time?’

‘Yes, that would be great. It’s a while since I’ve been there for a drink.’

Neither of us suggested a specific date or time.

The next time I walked into the Give and Take, Smiles was hurriedly keying something into his mobile phone. I had to wait for him to finish before he served me. ‘You’d be surprised who came in earlier,’ he said. ‘Some musicians from the Gay Symphony Orchestra. They booked the room upstairs to practise, about a dozen of them. I’ve been flirting with a very cute flautist.’

‘You’ve been flouncing with a flautist?’

‘*Flirting* with a flautist. Hope they come again. They bring a cultural ambience to the place. As a dealer in antiquarian books, you do too of course.’

About fifteen minutes later Dale turned up. This more or less confirmed that Smiles had sent him a message to come to the bar. Though not unhappy to see him, Smiles might have asked me first. He made amends by giving us both drinks on the house.

‘That’s very good of you, Smiles,’ I said, raising my glass. ‘Is this in honour of the Gay Symphony Orchestra’s visit?’ I turned to Dale. ‘He was flirting with a flautist.’

‘Well, maybe not flirting...’ Smiles explained, ‘Perhaps empathizing is more the word.’

‘Or fondling. Fondling a flautist?’

‘Ben! No, we had more a kind of resonance at a cultural level.’

He left Dale and me together. Trying not to sound suspicious, I asked, ‘Did you say you’d been here before?’

‘Not recently. When I first had the flat, my partner and I often went to bars and clubs, but as time went by we went out together less and less. We were drifting apart. I’ve more or less lost touch with the gay scene. This is relaxed compared with most of it. So many places are just about finding someone for sex.’

Okay, I thought, so you’re a nice guy, not wildly promiscuous, but whatever the faults of gay pubs and clubs, life can be very lonely without them. ‘Relationships have to start somewhere,’ I said. ‘People need to meet.’

‘People want different things. I’m not trying to be judgemental.’

‘You should talk to Jeremy. You wouldn’t think it, the way he is now, but many many years ago he used to be in the Gay Liberation Front. He hates everything about the scene, the anonymous sexual encounters, drugs, and so on and so on.’

‘It is hard to imagine your boss in GLF.’

‘Well he was. He tells me about it now and again... how important it is to respect ourselves and to act towards others in the same way... we must be true to ourselves and not be pressured into becoming stereotypes... being liberated does not mean being a libertine, you know,’ I said adopting Jeremy’s lecturing tone, though this was unfair to him as he usually spoke moderately. ‘His involvement in gay rights obviously meant a lot to him. These days he doesn’t see much of other gay men. He’s in his late fifties and would be out of place in the pubs and clubs where young guys go to find other young guys. Maybe even in here, where you get all ages, he wouldn’t feel all that comfortable.’

Perhaps I should have emulated Smiles’ practice of putting people in touch, and arranged for Dale and Jeremy to meet. They could have discussed endlessly how commercial and uncaring gay venues were. But what if, instead of the moaning session being a release for them, they made each other more miserable than ever?

‘Have you known him for long?’ he asked.

‘Eighteen months or so. I came to London without much money, and had to find a job fast. I’ve always loved books, and Jeremy had a *Help Wanted* ad on a booksellers’ website. When I first saw the shop you could hardly get through the door. Books were piled up everywhere.’

‘That didn’t put you off?’

‘I always think a well-stocked bookshop is like a walk-in encyclopaedia, a massive store of knowledge, far more than any one person could ever hold in his head. Jeremy’s bookshelves were crammed, everything was jumbled up, paperback novels, old leather-bound volumes, newish hardbacks, fiction and non-fiction, books stacked everywhere, including on the floor. If he had found a way to do it he would have hung them from the ceiling too. You had to sort of slalom your way through gaps in the piles of clutter. He needed help. We had to off-load hundreds of books to make room to move around properly... we even gave some away to charity shops. He found it hard to part with things, which is hardly compatible with the purpose of running a shop. Telling him they were bound for a good home made letting go of some of his precious finds easier for him. We organized what were left on the shelves, and went through and priced them all. He had a good grasp of how much they were worth. He broke his habit of indiscriminate buying, and sales picked up. He’s a bit eccentric, but he’s kindly and easygoing, which is what you want in a boss.’

‘I guessed you two were not lovers,’ Dale said smiling.

‘Oh no. Jeremy is too high-minded for that sort of thing. What about you? Are you courting anyone at the moment?’

‘Courting? That’s a word you don’t hear much from gay men. Nor from straights nowadays, come to

that.'

'You'll have to excuse me. It's the influence of all those Victorian novels in the shop. Lots of courting going on in them.'

'I dare say, and wooing, and swooning. Maybe if gays didn't hop into bed with one another so easily... no, you'll think I'm prudish. I'm not claiming to be better than anyone else. Working in the health service makes me aware there's a downside. Not that I see the patients myself.'

Since he was unwilling to say much about his sex life, I tried asking about his job instead. 'What do you do, actually?'

He turned his head slightly aside and said defensively, 'It's management. Right now for instance, I'm sorting out the laundry. I don't mean separating the coloureds from the whites. At the hospital, for years and years the laundry has always been in the same room with rows of big commercial machines, not very up to date, churning away. Now and again one wore out and had to be replaced, but in general the laundry remained pretty much the same. Then we had an inspection. We were told the whole set-up was obsolete, so we decided to go for a new up to date laundry on another part of the site.'

'We thought we were doing well until halfway through the firm that won the contract for the building and installation work went bust. There were half a dozen subcontractors and suppliers. No one could agree who was liable for what. Now it's all going way over budget, and I spend half my bloody time trying to sort out the mess. Sorry, you must be wishing you hadn't asked.'

'No, not at all. I didn't realize you had such a responsible job. I suppose I'll have to try and talk sensibly to you now,' but jokingly I asked 'Any chance of the laundry taking a few shirts and bits of stuff for me?'

He laughed. 'Thanks Ben. Thanks for saying it's a responsible job. It can be rewarding, like finding cheaper suppliers for some of the stuff we buy, so money is released that can be put to good use elsewhere. I've managed that more than a few times.'

When Smiles began closing up we left together. Neither of us invited the other back home. Instead we exchanged phone numbers and parted at a street corner. He had been good company, but was clearly not the sort who slipped casually into bed with someone after a couple of drinks. Maybe he was a bit down-hearted having lost his boyfriend, and the problems with the laundry were clearly worrying him, but doing something as worthwhile as helping run a hospital impressed me. This time he had not mentioned wanting to find a flatmate, but the subject cannot have been far from his mind. It made me wary of getting too involved with him.

The earplugs helped me to sleep that night. The following night, Friday, was even better. My tormentors were out, and no noise intruded from upstairs. I left for work on Saturday refreshed. However in the evening, after I had eaten, Jayde knocked on my door. She wore a close-fitting dress and her face was heavily made up, as though she was about to go out, but she asked anxiously, 'You've got to help me, Ben... like, it's an emergency. I don't know anyone else to ask. Jake's collapsed.'

I followed her upstairs. 'He's in there,' she said, pointing to the door of the bathroom. He was lying in the bath, completely still, only his head out of the water, his eyes closed.

'What happened?'

'I don't know.' She hung back by the open door. 'He took some pills. We got them at a party the other night. Then he came in here for his bath. You don't think it's, like, an overdose, do you?'

I called his name loudly, but he did not stir. 'Surely he can't have drowned.' I put my hand into the tepid water and pressed on his chest, hoping to feel a heartbeat or the slight rise and fall of his ribs, but could detect nothing. She stood watching. Not knowing much about first aid, but afraid something serious was wrong, I tugged at his arms and shouted in his ears, but he remained comatose. 'Did you try mouth to mouth?' I asked.

She ignored my question, but said, 'His head's above water. He can't have drowned.'

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