

Time to Think

Eight Short Stories

by

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Smashwords Edition

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Also by Rigby Taylor

The Price of Freedom

Dome of Death

Dancing Bare

Sebastian

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Spreading the Word

Sebastian turned on his side and gazed out at the sun filled garden. With an impatient sigh he rolled over and faced the wall. He sat up and dusted imaginary crumbs off the divan then lay on his back with his hands by his side and practiced relaxation exercises. After a few seconds he lost concentration and stared vacantly up at cobwebs on the verandah rafters.

‘Your tendons will never repair if you’re always on the go,’ the doctor had snapped only an hour before. ‘Why can’t you just lie back and relax?’

‘Because it’s not my nature,’ Sebastian had answered with a fetching sigh. ‘Perhaps if you were to massage me...?’

‘And risk Reginald’s wrath? Not bloody likely.’

‘Wouldn’t it be worth a broken arm?’ Sebastian grinned.

‘Not even you are worth that, Sebastian. Shut up and let the sounds of nature lull you to somnolence.’

But Sebastian couldn’t. Time plodded. He began to fidget. Struggled to his feet and leaned over the rail. Turned and smiled at his reflection in the lounge-room windows, then returned to the divan Reggie had dragged out onto the verandah and arranged himself in an artistic pose; not much fun when there was no one to admire the result. Where was Reggie?

The whine of a vehicle crawling up the steep drive sounded promising. Raising himself on an elbow he watched a beige car turn in under the trees and fall silent. The humid air throbbed to the raucous stridor of a million Cicadas.

‘Reggie,’ he called to a rustle in the shrubbery beside the verandah, ‘we have visitors. Stop massacring those plants and go make them welcome.’

A few minutes later, virility artlessly accentuated by torn-off jeans, a gold nipple ring and heavy work boots, Reginald was trailed onto the verandah by a middle-aged, portly gentleman in a wide-brimmed straw hat, grey suit, white shirt and dark tie. Scarlet and white trainers on tiny feet rendered the vision ridiculous rather than eccentric. Panting audibly, the man gazed back towards his car and dabbed his forehead with a large, damp handkerchief.

Fallen arches, Sebastian surmised, wondering what surprises were in the briefcase the fellow was clutching to his sweaty bosom.

The flat-footed man’s companion mounted the steps. Sebastian sucked in his stomach, arched his neck ever so slightly and beamed a winning smile at the dark, slim, handsome and hatless youth in white cotton slacks and open-necked shirt whose sun-dazzled eyes were blind to the apparition in the shadowy interior of the deep verandah.

Reginald waved the guests to low wicker chairs. Before they could sit, however, a discreet cough from the shadows made them jump and peer into the gloom where a charmingly arranged young man sprawled elegantly. A tiny wisp of silk on his groin fluttered in the light breeze like a turquoise butterfly impatient to escape. As an ornament to accentuate the golden hue of the satiny skin it was perfect; as a garment it failed exquisitely.

‘Lovely weather,’ Sebastian murmured, lavishing a seductive smile on the startled youth. ‘How thoughtful of you to visit us. Forgive my not rising to greet you, but I have a gammy heel. Are you lost? Tourists? Selling something?’

‘No... no... we’re...’ Apparently mesmerised by his host’s groin the young man’s voice faded to a whisper.

‘We’re not selling anything — we’re giving it away!’ flatfoot interrupted, eyes studiously avoiding that which his companion seemed unable to drag his gaze from.

‘Why? Isn’t it any good?’ Sebastian’s smile was innocent.

‘On the contrary! It is the greatest gift offered to mankind.’

‘My mother told me never to accept gifts from older men,’ Reggie frowned. ‘They always want something in exchange.’ He gestured irritably. ‘Please! Sit down, both of you.’

The youth concealed a grin and plonked himself down.

The older man lowered himself suspiciously into his chair, coughed twice, stood up and gazed around as if checking the exits, changed his mind, sat again heavily, clutched his briefcase even closer to his chest, stared fixedly at Reginald and announced, 'I am referring to the gift of joy one experiences when one truly knows and lives with God.'

'That must be you,' burred Sebastian to the handsome adolescent. 'You're like a young god.'

'No... No I'm only William.'

'Well, Only-William, I'm Sebastian and this is Reggie. Do you live with God, William?'

'Yes... No... I mean... yes but... I live with Dad.' He nodded towards the older man.

'Your mother must be exceptionally good looking?'

'Why?'

'You bear no resemblance to your father.'

William had time to flash a smile before succumbing to a choking cough.

'My name is Henry Shatter,' the homely and sweating father announced brusquely, 'and we are here to offer you everlasting happiness.'

'How nice of you, Henry.'

.....

'Now, let's see if I've understood everything,' Sebastian recapitulated. 'When God's sick of watching us muck everything up, he'll let us live in peace, love, health and harmony with everyone and everything for ever and ever... as long as we're part of your flock.'

'Yes.'

'Imagine, Reggie, you and me—lovers for eternity.'

Reginald's expression was enigmatic.

Henry turned an unattractive shade of grey. 'No, no! There will be none of that!'

'What?'

'Sodom and Gomorrah!'

'Blessed if I know them.'

'Cities of evil punished by God!'

Sebastian leaned forward and patted the old man's knee. 'No worries, Henry, we're not evil. You'd be hard put to find anyone more law-abiding and honest than us. Isn't that so, Reggie?'

Reginald rumbled assent.

'You may be honest and law-abiding, but you've just admitted you are a homosexual!' Henry paused and pulled a face as if merely saying the word had somehow polluted his throat. 'It is against God's law.'

'So god hates us?'

'No! He loves you but hates your actions.'

'Goodness! Then why did he make us like this?'

'To test you. To see if you could overcome your affliction and be worthy of his love.'

'I don't feel afflicted.'

'God sends troubles to test our worth.'

'Like plagues, pestilence, war and death?' Sebastian smiled brightly.

'Yes.'

Sebastian's smile dissolved into a frown. 'Are you sure he's a loving god, Henry? Maiming, laming, murdering and spreading dread-diseases—just to test us? To see if we are worthy of his love?'

'Well...'

'Did you hear that, Reggie. God sits up in heaven organising his own snuff-movies.' Sebastian turned to a drop-jawed William. 'Doesn't it strike you as the teeniest little bit perverted, Only-William?'

'I... don't think it is meant to be...'

‘We are not here to question God’s works!’ thundered Henry. ‘The bible says that homosexuals may never go to heaven.’

‘Homosexual is an adjective, not a noun, Henry, and it carries such a lot of baggage. Reggie and I are same-sex-oriented men.’ He smiled winningly. ‘And remarkably fine specimens—don’t you think?’ He stretched and the wisp of blue silk trembled precariously. ‘Also, Henry, a statement that begins ‘All homosexuals...’ will be both false and meaningless

‘It won’t.’

‘No? Are you the same as all heterosexual men?’

‘Of course I am!’

‘Most murderers and child molesters are heterosexual.’

‘Well... yes.’

‘That one word, heterosexual. Does it adequately describe you, Henry Shatter?’

‘I repeat, God hates the sin, but loves the sinner.’

‘Parried like a politician. So, you love me, but hate what you think I do?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do I do?’

‘All homosexuals are unhappy because they reject god’s love, subvert young boys into their foul practices, undermine family values, indulge in promiscuous sex with multiple partners... like...like... dogs!’ Henry glared at his silent hosts, paused indecisively, then, drawing strength from faces which were the picture of concentrated interest and credulity, He dared the final lunge— ‘and then God punishes them with AIDS.’

An appreciative silence, then....

‘Does that describe us, Reggie?’

‘Nope! Always preferred it from the front, myself. Never cared for the ‘doggy’ position. Like to see who’s doing what to whom.’

A thoughtful silence followed this revelation.

‘You will never attain eternal life and happiness unless you renounce your evil ways and beg God’s forgiveness,’ Henry asserted with only slightly less conviction.

‘Oh, Reggie, we can’t go to heaven, ‘ Sebastian wailed whipping off the tiny bit of silk and dabbing at his eyes. ‘It’s unfair, Henry. You must have misunderstood God’s intentions.’

Henry shrivelled back into his seat. William slithered forward.

‘Cover yourself!’ Henry ordered. ‘God hates perverts!’

‘Oh, but so do I! We only indulge in good clean fun, don’t we, Reggie?’

‘Sexual congress with another man is unnatural!’

‘It’s perfectly natural for me! Don’t forget Christians were stoning left-handed people not so long ago and burning women who spoke in church.’

‘Sex between men is wrong!’

‘Poor Henry. You’re obsessed with sex! Don’t you know the Bible has no sexual ethic? But it does have a ‘love’ ethic. What do you mean when you say you ‘love’ me, Henry?’

‘I love you as Jesus loves—in purity.’

‘According to Luke, Jesus told us ‘to judge for ourselves what is right.’

‘You think that you, a sinner, can ever know God’s intentions?’

‘Know thy enemy, Henry.’

‘God’s purpose for sexual union is children.’

‘Is William your youngest?’

‘Yes.’

Sebastian turned his brilliant smile on William. ‘How old are you, William?’

‘Nineteen.’

‘Then, Henry,’ gasped Sebastian in horror, ‘you haven’t had sex for over nineteen years! Poor darling!’

Henry’s eyes glazed. ‘William! We are going.’

‘But, you can’t go! You came to save us!’

‘You must want to be saved.’

‘I do!’ cried Sebastian, leaping to his feet. ‘I do! I do!’

Henry struggled to his feet.

‘I insist you save me,’ ordered Sebastian petulantly, placing both hands on Henry’s shoulders and pressing him firmly back into the chair. ‘Especially since you have accepted our hospitality.’

Positioned directly in front of the older man, hands on slim, evenly bronzed hips, Sebastian stared sorrowfully at the averted eyes of his guest. ‘Do you realise, Henry, that hundreds of people regularly pay a great deal of money to see me like this, and you are turning away your gaze? What on earth’s the matter with you? Don’t you like God’s handiwork?’

‘You have sold yourself to the devil and are perverting God’s plan. A good man would cover his unclean parts.’

‘Speak for yourself! I showered minutes before you arrived. You despise God’s handiwork and are obsessed by sex, whereas I am content with the life God gave me.’

‘You twist my meaning. God doesn’t hate you, he hates your actions.’

‘I am my actions, just as you are yours.’

‘No! You can be changed. You can become like me, pure in mind and body.’

‘Quite frankly, the offer doesn’t appeal. I think I enjoy this world rather more than you and certainly do less harm to my fellow men.’

‘How dare you!’

‘How dare you? Your assertion that my life is evil, is an attempt to destroy my self-respect, contentment and love of life!’ Sebastian’s voice had attained the cutting edge of a practiced tub-thumper. In vain did Henry plug his ears. ‘Everyone is different. You surely didn’t choose to be a creepy fat maggot. Reggie didn’t choose to be a gorgeous hunk and William was born cute, curious and lively. Unless you accept people as they are you are doomed to die as you live - a moral and mental cripple.’

Sebastian paused for effect, threw himself onto the divan in a pose evoking Michelangelo’s Adam receiving the gift of life, and beamed a winning smile. ‘No offence, Henry, but I hope you rot in hell for a thousand years for every young man who kills himself because of your mind-poisoning lies and malignant dissemination of guilt.’ He sighed sorrowfully into the ensuing silence and, with a sensuous stroke of flanks and a fluttering of lashes at William, threw back his head, the better to expose a fine neck.

Henry, as thick-skinned as the next salesman, took up the gauntlet. ‘Guilt is it? The guilt is in wrong action! I point out the action to allow the sinner to meet God!’

‘Let God tell me himself.’

‘I am his messenger.’

‘If God is infinitely smart, then he would choose someone infinitely more attractive than you as his messenger.’

‘St. Paul, in his letters to the Romans...’

‘According to Gore Vidal, St Paul was bonking Timothy and, preferring his young men cut, had him circumcised. A dangerous operation at that age. He made him Bishop of Antioch as a reward. No! Don’t interrupt!’

Henry subsided in horror as his inquisitor stood again and leaned over him.

‘Even you, Henry, must know that the Bible’s a tendentious translation from Greek and Hebrew texts. Even the word homosexuality was invented in the nineteen-fifties. Prurient pastors, no longer able to rail against women and other races, turned their persecutory talents to sexual orientation, rendering millions miserable and causing thousands of suicides.’

With a supreme effort Henry surged forward knocking Sebastian back onto the divan, grabbed his son’s wrist and hauled him down the steps and along the leaf-strewn path to his car.

‘Oh well, can’t convert ’em all,’ sighed Sebastian philosophically. ‘Pity about William, though.’

‘Henry was in such a rush to escape contamination he left his briefcase.’

William ran back and, smiling shyly, bravely faced Sebastian who was standing at the bottom of the steps with the briefcase.

‘One day you may want to talk to someone,’ Sebastian murmured, slipping a card into William’s hand. ‘That’s our address and phone number. We’d be delighted to see you—any time at all.’

William took the briefcase, lightly brushing his hosts’ fingers before racing back to God’s messenger of mercy and grace.

Free Will

I reckon there's no such thing as free will. We're manipulated from birth to be obedient conformists who never rock boats, take risks or think for ourselves. It doesn't matter who you talk to, pretty soon you realise their ideas, opinions and actions are copied from videos, TV, newspapers, magazines, books... There's nothing original in their heads. People don't think—they respond to prodding. When we were kids, my best friend and I were always pretending we were heroes from the movies or comics. All kids do and it doesn't matter. What matters is that it doesn't stop when they grow up. Adults should be independent, clear-thinking role models for kids, but instead they adopt the latest fads, buy all the crap advertisements tell them to, and holiday in places that resemble the resorts of the rich and famous, always hoping they'll be taken for a celebrity. And old people are no better! Pathetic.

It may seem pretentious for a fifteen year-old to be so cynical, but I reckon I've earned the right because I was one of the deluded masses until a tragedy made me realise what a dangerous fool I'd become. That I'm able to write this now in my bedroom instead of a Borstal dormitory is thanks to Robert, Mum's favourite brother. He's twenty-three; twelve years younger than Mum, eight years older than me, but although he's my uncle he never took much notice of me until last summer.

Robert left school at fifteen to be general dogsbody for Mr Bavistok. I was seven, and when we visited them I was a bit frightened because the old man's bald head and dark, deep-set eyes made him look like a skull. But he always treated me as if I was important—listening to me and asking my opinion on all sorts of things, so I liked him more than I was frightened. When the old man died suddenly last year, Robert got totally depressed and just moped around the place, letting it go to rack and ruin, Mum said. When we visited Robert and saw the beautiful old place looking derelict she got really angry and told him to stop being so selfish and snap out of it because he was only twenty-two, bloody rich now he'd inherited everything, and could have any girl he wanted. Robert told her to shut the fuck up because she didn't know what she was talking about. Then Mum cried, so he had to apologise. She's good at that, crying to get her own way.

Robert finally got his act together and took an extended holiday in Greece, because he's keen on classical ruins and art, then spent the rest of the northern summer hiking in the Balkan Mountains and lazing on the Adriatic coast. Mum and I never mentioned him at home because Dad would only sneer that Robert must have been a very special secretary to have been left a fortune after only eight years. Mum would tell him to be nice because I was Robert's only nephew and if I played my cards right, I might inherit something eventually.

'Huh!' he'd snort, 'Pete's not like your precious Robert!'

I had no idea what he was talking about so kept my mouth shut.

Although Robert had usually more or less ignored me when we visited, he'd always been my hero. Tall and sort of tough and rough, but handsome too, he did all the work for Mr. Bavistok so he had a great body—like a Greek god people used to say. I figured he'd be looking for a friend when he got home, and I was determined to be it! All I had to do was get him to notice me. My plans were well in hand when the letter came with his return flight details.

Robert had left his Mercedes Sports for Mum, so we used it to pick him up. It was hot enough to put the hood down and Mum got her usual wolf whistles along with envious stares from a few guys. Even though she's thirty-five, she's still a looker. I don't know who was more excited, Mum or me when he appeared through the arrivals door. She gave him a big hug and told him he was too thin—I thought he looked perfect and envied his tan. To my surprise we were the same height—I'd grown more than I realised. He shook my hand and smiled at me, which I took for a good omen.

Back home Dad grunted a minimum welcome before shutting himself in his shed. When Mum finally stopped asking Robert questions and telling all about us, I dragged him to my room. I had exactly fifteen minutes to make him notice me before he left.

While he was away, I'd followed a rigid fitness program that was guaranteed to bulk up chest and shoulders with structured weight lifting and press-ups, and improve my legs by running ten kilometres a day. I used to get really exhausted at the beginning, but after a week I reckon I got addicted. Anyway, it worked and I hoped my plan would be as successful. My bait was Robert's interest in classical art and sculpture. I'd practised posing in the same poses as Ancient Greek statues. All I had to do was get him into my room, close the door and... I stopped thinking at that point. If nothing else he'd have to notice me; acknowledge my existence. Depending on his reaction I'd modify things as I went along. At least he'd realise we had an interest in common—classical art.

I'd prepared the room by closing the windows and curtains, placing a low box draped with a sheet against the far wall and arranging the reading lamp so it threw a sort of spotlight onto it.

'Phew! It's like a sauna in here, and dark, open a window.'

'No, please. I want to show you something. Take off your shirt if you're too hot. Won't take long. Just lie on the bed and watch'

Robert grunted something, but didn't sound irritated, then dragged his shirt over his head and lay on my bed, hands behind his head, grey eyes watching. A tiny gold medallion glinting against his smooth brown chest, triggered a crisis of confidence—his body was much better than mine! Before I could wimp out I passed him a photo of Praxiteles' Apollo Sauroktonos and while he was distracted, stripped; not difficult as I was only wearing a pair of shorts.

Robert frowned, then heaved himself upright onto his elbow as if to leave. I'd blown it! Before he could move I leaped onto the draped box and took up the well-practised pose. 'What do you reckon? Have I got it right?'

No response. Hot with shame and embarrassment I moved to jump down but Robert held up his hand.

'No, don't move.' He got off the bed and walked around the room studying me, then threw himself back on the bed with a sort of barking laugh. 'Where's the scrawny kid who used to live in this room?'

I'd never felt such an utter idiot. What could he be thinking? 'Shall I get down?'

'No. I haven't finished comparing you yet.' He got up and for a few more seconds walked around looking from me to the photo, then nodded and said casually, 'You look better than Sauroktonos, I've always been a bit disappointed by his wide waist. How old are you? Seventeen? Eighteen?'

'Fifteen.'

'The cusp of manhood,' he said softly. 'You look and seem much older.' Robert pulled the curtains back, swung round to look at me, frowned and stood quietly staring for a long minute.

Dreams of friendship faded and I began to feel pretty stupid standing naked on the box, so I jumped down and slipped on my shorts. 'Should I try to become really muscled like Hermes?' I asked to break the silence.

'Definitely not. Athletic youth is enchanting; virile manhood merely admirable.'

Suddenly, he stood up to go. I'd failed. At the door he turned, frowned, then asked as if he had no interest in my reply, 'Wanna spend the summer at my place?'

I choked.

'Well?'

Mum was thrilled, chattering about clean air, healthy exercise, how good it was of Robert to take an interest in me, telling me to behave, not annoy, do as I was told, not get in the way.....

Dad was his usual sour self. 'Do you really want to go?' he demanded with curled lip as if no one in their right mind would consider the offer.

'Yes!' I almost shouted.

Dad's smile was twisted. 'Play your cards right and you could become his private secretary,' he sneered, and with a snort of derision retreated to his shed as we purred away—hood down, spirits up.

‘You must read ‘The Vatican Cellars’ by André Gide,’ Robert said when we stopped beside a river to eat Mum’s sandwiches.

‘What’s it about?’

‘It’s a satire poking ridicule at people who change their morals to suit their desires. The story revolves around Lafcadio, an exceedingly handsome young fellow with whom both men and women fall in love—or lust, and this gives him an exaggerated sense of his own worth. He’s a Romanian, who, when he was the same age as you, stayed with his mother and her wealthy lover in a villa near Duino on the Adriatic, where they entertained a stream of guests. Wearing not a stitch of clothing the entire summer, because it was believed that an all-over tan was essential for both beauty and health, Lafcadio ran wild, spending his days under the pines, among rocks and creeks, or swimming or canoeing in the sea.’ Robert’s smile was guileless. ‘I spent a month in Duino... and I’ve decided that this summer you’ll be Lafcadio!’

‘But...’

‘No buts!’

We raced each other back to the car and powered away. For the next half hour Robert carefully explained his plans and my part in them. I was nervous, certain I’d fail, but incredibly excited and determined not to disappoint.

The low stone house glowed pale gold in the sunlight. Flanked by towering eucalypts and fronted by sun-slashed lawns, flowering shrubs and ornamental urns, it flickered into view between the gigantic old trees lining the drive. We pulled up in front and switched off the engine. Country peace. Bird calls, leaf-rustles, insect hums were the only things that dared break the silence. With a shout of relief that nothing had changed since my last visit I threw off my clothes, raced for the lake, paddled the kayak till my arms ached, swam till I chilled, then raced back to the house where Robert had thrown the windows wide, placed a substantial meal on the sunny end of the verandah—and hidden my clothes. While we ate he gave me my instructions. I was to have at least five hours of vigorous physical exercise every day, and three hours of mind-enlarging intellectual exercise every evening.

‘Intellectual exercise?’

‘That’s right.’

‘With you?’

‘The friends I told you we always have to stay during the summer are intellectually stimulating.’

‘And I’m to be part of this... this intellectually stimulating social scene... naked... day and night... like Lafcadio? Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘But...’

‘Be yourself ‘

‘But...’

‘You’re a young god, remember?’

‘But...’

‘Anyone who is shocked may go.’

As the first guests’ cars appeared on the drive I panicked and hid in the forest behind the house, watching them. They looked pleasant, chatted with Robert and laughed a lot, and after unloading their car went for a swim. Robert and a couple of the younger guys skinny-dipped and no one protested, so I conquered my fear of ridicule, slipped unnoticed into the far end of the lake and swam to join them.

After sunbathing the others put on their clothes and we wandered back up to the house. I braced myself for some comment but to my relief no one appeared to think I was doing anything strange. Instead I was complimented on my fitness and all-over tan. According to the handsome husband of a pretty blond woman who kept reciting poetry, I was a ‘child of nature’. One of the others—a

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