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Marek (1988)

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

I WANDER UP OXFORD STREET. Still very warm and humid. Cruised aggressively by some rough trade: two guys, together, possibly out to gay-bait. No real risk, given there's other people around, so I stop to talk with them for a few moments to see if I can tell. I can't, not for sure. Make an excuse, and move on.

Cruise the Oxford Towers (packed) and the Midnight Shift (deserted). Wander back along Oxford Street, vaguely disconsolate. Thinking about something else, I become inattentive, then suddenly aware of someone coming toward me; we are almost level before I've taken him in. I really only have time to meet his glance briefly before we pass; maybe Italian, certainly beautiful. A few seconds after we've passed each other, we both turn. He saunters on to the next corner. I lean against a wall watching. He turns the corner out of sight. I waver, suddenly indecisive. Am I in the mood to start something new? Maybe not; leave it; maybe walk to the corner to see if he's still there. Yes, about forty yards down the side street, under some trees, waiting. I approach slowly and he doesn't move. He takes out his cigarettes. As I do mine. It's me who asks for the light. We exchange a few words. I invite him to walk with me. He has nowhere to take me and I can't find the twelve-dollar rooms that Ken had tried for a couple of nights back. It will have to be my place, though I'd promised Patricia and James I wouldn't take any more boys back.

He's Slovakian, and his name is Marek. Although he hardly speaks English and I know no Slovakian, I can tell he's apprehensive, and then I realize this is because he thinks I'm taking him back to a place which I share with a "friend," i.e., lover, and is reluctant to come, probably because he thinks I'm setting up a threesome. I try to reassure him. (*Please, please don't go now*, I think, but don't say.) Hesitantly he comes to the door of the flat and insists on waiting outside while I go in and plead with Patricia and James, who graciously relent. We go straight to my room.

He still seems apprehensive, or maybe it's reserve. We have a drink but start making love before finishing even the first glass. How old? Could

be anywhere between eighteen and twenty-five. And something else: as I enter him I become highly sensitive to him. Out of respect for him certainly, but it isn't at all about holding back: right at this moment my desire for him *is* that gentleness: I'm hopelessly in thrall to his beauty. Later everything gets more passionate, but even then it feels to me like ecstasy as homage. He remains distinct, distinctly beautiful, and my pleasure right up to orgasm and far beyond is bound up with that perception.

Later we dress and go down to Oxford Street and to the Exchange. The place is packed, straight and gay, trendy and cruisy. We stand apart from the main throng, touching thighs. I want to be with him. We hold hands in a way no one else can see. Communication is difficult, but I work out he lives with some people he doesn't like. He gets tense when I tried to find out more, as if afraid of something or someone. He's only recently arrived in Australia, but this is to be his home. He's been lonely. We leave the Exchange and go across to the Midnight Shift. Only five others are there. We sit at the back and soon are the only ones left. Never before have I been the last to leave a gay bar—the prospect has always been too dispiriting. Not tonight. Just before we leave Marek says, “Tonight I am happy.” He says this with a smile but also with something else in his expression that makes me wonder again about his situation, and the people he lives with.

We go back to Patricia and James's place, creeping in so as not to wake them. As before, it's lovemaking through the caress rather than the grasp, becoming sensitive to, rather than possessing, each other. And, for me, as always, the seeing: on this night the visual stays with me: the nape of the neck, curve of the back, hardness of the forearm, vulnerability of the flank. One image especially stays with me: him facedown but resting on his elbows and with his head and shoulders arching upwards, a poise removed from, more erotic than, either coyness or complete abandon.

True love doesn't have to be forever, and nor does it have to be deep communion with another. Those are precious aspects of love, for sure, but not the way it always has to be. As here with Marek, I've sometimes experienced the kind of love which isn't, initially at least, or indeed ever, the love of deep connection, but the superficial, beautiful connection with the physicality of another. It's not the predatory, grossly insensitive, often ugly desire to possess another, which in pornography, straight and gay, seems depressingly often the truth of the desire being expressed. It's more like the rarification of desire into an attitude of erotic reverence for another. Some great writers on love warn that when you give up the

predatory attitude you succumb to the abject one, facing the prospect of all the negativity in your life condensing into an attitude of abjection before the beautiful. I've never felt that, probably because I'm too superficial. Disorientation and inadequacy yes, and sometimes deep distress, but never abjection. Even if the affair ends badly, something new hurts, but some deeper loss has been allayed.

Eventually Marek indicates that he should go, and asks when we can meet again. I have to leave Sydney the following day, but we arrange to meet in a week's time. It will mean a special journey back to Sydney from Canberra, but I don't hesitate. He's adamant I must not try to get in touch with him because of his "friends," so I also give him the telephone number of Patricia and James's flat. He gets up to go, but I pull him back down beside me. I've never before wanted to be with anyone as much as I do with him now. We lie together for what must have been a couple of hours, occasionally smoking, always sharing the same cigarette, communicating entirely through touch. The bed is near an open window through which, still naked, we feel the freshness of the dawn on our skin, and later hear the waking of others to the day, before falling asleep ourselves.

In the week I was away from Sydney he was never out of my thoughts. Had it been like some past encounters I wouldn't have been surprised to find such thoughts soon swamped by all the trivia of daily life and eventually washed away with them, and my deciding at the last minute not to return after all. I can be superficial like that, too. Not this time. I thought about him constantly, was painfully restless, and if anything my feelings grew in intensity. So this time was different, although it was a difference I couldn't articulate. Words failed me, or rather came to consciousness as clichés. And so it is: in love we struggle to articulate this intensely unique feeling, only to find ourselves uttering a platitude or commonplace which tells us it isn't unique at all, while understanding the cliché for the first time: suddenly it resonates with experienced meaning, even as it's useless as a means for expressing that experience. Yet here goes: I couldn't wait to see him again; I couldn't sleep properly for thinking about him; first and foremost I wanted to hold him again, in my arms, to feel the touch of his skin against mine.

In fact I actually flew back a day early, only to discover he'd been trying to ring me at Patricia and James's, but hadn't left a message or been able to make himself fully understood. I turned up at our appointed meeting place but, by then, as I feared, he wasn't there. I waited for an hour, and then searched all the bars for him, without success. I kept looking, even

waiting in the exact places where we'd sat together, feeling more lonely than if I'd never met him. These are alienating places for the lonely, the more so when you are missing someone rather than looking for anyone.

I knew something different was happening with me in relation to him because throughout all this time I was searching I had zero interest in anyone else. Once I thought I saw him away in the distance in Oxford Street. My heart leapt, and then broke (more clichés) when I discovered it wasn't him after all. Later I ran into Ken; it was awkward—anything I said would have given the wrong signals, so I said as little as possible, which also gave all the wrong signals. I lay awake that night wondering about what had happened to him. When he'd mentioned the people he lived with, and insisted I couldn't contact him because of them, he was tense. Maybe he was in the country illegally, and being exploited by those who'd got him or were keeping him here. It was pointless to speculate, but I couldn't help it. The next night I looked all over again and kept doing so every night until, desolate, I had to leave Sydney. And just when I had left, he rang again, but still with no message, no address, no number. During those last days in Australia I developed this painfully acute awareness of my surroundings, beautiful, harsh, reflecting my aloneness back to me. After I'd left Australia, he rang, several times, but Patricia or James said they couldn't make him understand, or he wouldn't believe, I'd left the country. So I never saw him again.

What would have happened had we met again that night? I was aware of all the sensible reasons for believing the affair was transient and doomed: for a start we hardly knew each other. I was in love with his beauty but we all know that's only skin deep. And anyway, wasn't it just my usual thing: not love so much as a romance with experience? And how could I be sure of anything after just one night together, and with the language difficulties too? Further, the distance barrier would have doomed it: with him in Australia and me in England we literally could not have lived farther apart on this Earth. So yes, had we met, the relationship might have proved to be nothing more than an infatuation, yet because we didn't meet, I was left fixated at the point just prior to when I would have discovered it was only that.

And yet, and yet . . . at the time I was sure I was in love, as sure as I've ever been about anything. And I still believe that now, all these years later. No, it probably wouldn't have lasted, and if it had, it would have been as something inconceivably different to what it was at its inception. But as it was then conceived, it would, I know, have led ineluctably to a

consummation (something different from and beyond first-time intercourse or even intercourse per se): a precious, intensely sensual connection, an intimacy forever remembered even if, or especially because it couldn't last, and because everything afterward was a gradual falling away, a falling back into the separation of ordinary life. Unconsummated, it remained the beautiful wound: "Beauty's wound is sharper than any weapon's and it runs through the eyes down to the soul" (Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*). Beauty, skin deep, cuts to the quick.

I'm hours into the flight home, returning early on the news that a friend is dying. It's dark; the flight attendants have all disappeared and some or most of the passengers are trying to sleep. I'm awake, my mind crowded with impressions of the time in Australia, and of Marek most especially. And then I remember, too, that I never got to go swimming with Lachlan. I don't want to go home.