

# LONDON TRIPTYCH

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1954

Another arrest reported in the papers this morning. Some poor sod caught in a public toilet. Hardly a week goes by without one. Now, I can't claim to know much about it, but it seems to me that when old men hang around public toilets while younger men are pissing, we aren't out for a glimpse of cock, or even a grope. No, in truth what roots us to the spot is the most profound feeling of envy because we can't piss like that any more. Respect, even. When you reach fifty, it trickles out.

He pisses like a horse. I can hear him through the whole house. A veritable Niagara. It's not a big house – he calls it 'the doll's house', to my chagrin. Tall as he is, he's forever banging his head on my lampshades and doorjambs, as I totter behind him. He strides through my tiny rooms with such confidence and familiarity, as if it were a castle and he its prince, and I feel like the valet who can call nothing here my own.

He has so much life in him that it's made me realise for the first time that I am old. And it's not a feeling I'm happy with. Not at all. It's not something I ruminated on and came to a calm decision about. Not something I've been refusing to accept and can no longer hold in abeyance. I simply looked at my face in the mirror and said aloud, 'You are old.' It's not even the exterior that made me gasp with horror – the grey hair, the lined face, the tarnished eyes. These things I know. I see them every day. I can live with looking old, just about. Or at least I could, until recently. But I have met

a boy whose youth makes me feel ancient to the very core, ossified and pointless. That's what made me smart.

When I first saw him, a month or so ago, I thought him quite the handsomest boy I'd seen in a long time. He wears his hair slicked into a quiff, and sports the general attire of what a newspaper last year nicknamed Teddy Boys. But when he removed his clothing I realised for the first time what I'd been missing in a model: someone who shines more when they are nude than when clothed. Skin with light trapped beneath it. Skin that looks complete, rather than exposed; that looks painted, full of colour and life, blood blue and flesh pink. Yellows, purples, whites. Tints I don't know I could ever reproduce. Strangely, he seems more relaxed when naked, more himself, more at home in his flesh than in his clothes. And because of that you don't really notice that he is naked.

His body is not exceptional, but he has tremendous definition, and a masculine grace that is best expressed by the word 'noble', if that doesn't sound too grand. When he speaks, however, it is with the jagged edges of simplicity. And, while that is not without its charm, it is clear that the sophistication of his being is concentrated on the surface. All his grace lies there, beautiful and richly visible. Within is merely an embryonic soul, his speech suggesting nothing but the workings of a half-grown heart.

In the presence of such concentrated beauty, I feel inspired for the first time in aeons: inspired to capture it in all its complexity and texture, all its pale beauty. I fill acres of paper with his crouched figure, his legs bent and twisted beyond recognition, his spine an abacus, a string of pearls arching impossibly as he nearly swallows himself like Ouroboros. The damp, dark caves of his armpits. The hairless plateau of his belly, tight and contoured. The planed edges of his muscular buttocks, carved to Hellenic perfection. If I placed my tongue there, I should expect them

to be cold and hard as marble. The masculine sweep from his hairline to the right angle of his shoulder as fluid and mesmerising as any waterfall; the line of gravity that runs the length of his torso, from the hollow of his throat to the jewel of his navel, cruciformed by the stigmata of his nut-brown nipples blurred with hair; the pucker of his anus like a knot in a tree.

I can't help but wonder what it must feel like to be so exposed to the gaze of another, to know that you are being stared at and scrutinised. We seem to be obsessed with doing everything in our power to deny or avoid the thorny question of the body unclothed, except perhaps in art. All we have now is shame, and fig leaves, and sniggering like schoolgirls. All we have is prudery. How then does this young man feel, spread out before me? How can he not feel shame? I wonder.

After he left today, I walked into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror, and it was then that I muttered like an incantation the words, *You are old*, the second-person address granting a distance that in no way diminished the painful truth. His presence diminishes me. And it is more than feeling too old to interest him sexually, and more than wanting my own youth back again: I am racked with envy that I am not him. They say desire and identification are almost indistinguishable, but I never understood it till I saw him in all his luminescence – a thing I have certainly never possessed. I removed my clothes and stood naked before the mirror, something I haven't done for at least forty years. It shocked me, suddenly, to reflect that at no point in my life, beyond that curiosity which adolescence precipitates, have I paid any attention to my body. I looked at my reflection, at my rounded, narrow shoulders with their tufts of grey hair, my rotund belly, my shrivelled privates, my stick-white legs, and I felt nothing but a deep, vertiginous sadness.

There comes a time in life when youth becomes just a word; a word whose meaning you almost feel impelled to look up in a dictionary, so strangely does it sit upon the tongue. I think it was Oscar Wilde – or was it George Bernard Shaw? – who said that youth is wasted on the young. And he was right. You look back on your own youth and view it with the eyes of another person, and it seems as foreign as another country, as distant as a star.

But sometimes, if you are lucky, you are allowed to view another's youth up close and scrutinise the glory and the invincibility of that infallible state. Perhaps that is why people have children. And, by the same token, that must be why childless old men like myself feel it all the more brutally, and crave it in others. I cannot now recall what it felt like to be young. I suppose that is because I was too busy *being* young to think about it. Or perhaps because my youth does not in truth warrant recollection. But I must have been a youth, at some stage in my life, all things considered! Must have been in some sense flawless and innocent – but again these are words whose definition evades me. Photographs must supply some clue. Almost another face entirely stares back at me though, from the few I do possess, never having liked to have my picture taken. I see in them a stranger, whose ways and wiles I no longer recollect; whose passions and fears are irretrievable now.

Christ, and I'm only fifty-four.

This young man has awoken me not to the value of my own youth, but to its tarnished loss and frivolous and unforgivable waste. He is a free spirit, as free a spirit as I have ever known, whereas I have never felt free. So, while his presence is a source of joy, it is also a source of incredible pain, throwing into stark relief the woeful inadequacies of my life.