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Telescope

Written by Jonathan Buckley

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Telescope

Jonathan Buckley

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For Susanne Hillen and Bruno Buckley

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No man ever came to an experience which was satiating
Ralph Waldo Emerson

1

Charlie thinks he has found the right person: Ellen Symons, forty-two, professional carer, recently separated, obviously capable, immediately likeable and available right away. Janina thought she was lovely, says Charlie, and we both know that this is an adjective used sparingly by Janina, and very rarely upon first acquaintance. 'What do you think?' he says, producing a photo. The face is plain and pleasant enough, but I can't say that loveliness radiates from it – she looks kindly, slightly bemused (understandable, in the circumstances) and extremely tired. I'd have guessed somewhere nearer fifty than forty. If he's happy I'm happy, I tell Charlie. He's definitely happy, he assures me: Ellen was their clear first choice. It turns out, however, that she's the only choice. Candidate number one, upon being shown a snap of the invalid, said 'I'm sorry, no, I can't,' and departed so quickly it was as if Charlie had pulled down his pants in front of her. The next put her hand to her mouth and said nothing for a full minute, before similarly excusing herself. Another suggested that, in view of what was being asked of her, the remuneration should be revised upwards to the tune of one hundred percent. Only

Ellen passed the test of full disclosure impressively. 'Gosh,' she murmured, but regained her balance right away. Within a minute they were discussing the arrangements. Janina brought her upstairs to see the room that would be hers and the room where the patient will die. She stayed for coffee.

My new lair has been decorated and shelves have been erected. Not enough shelves – a lot of stuff will have to go into the loft. Can't complain, however. Charlie has a photo of the room, and it all looks very nice. If I change my mind about the white, some colour can be introduced – Janina thinks it's too cold, but if white is what I want, white it shall be. He even has a photo of the view from my future window, and this looks nice too: fields, distant low hills, a lot of sky. Janina is taking care of the logistics of the removal. She'll oversee the packing, the re-routing of the mail, meter readings, and so on. 'My wife could have run the Berlin airlift single-handed,' says Charlie. He collects a takeaway and we watch TV for a couple of hours.

Goodbye to Sandra, and not a wet eye in the house. 'I'll miss you,' she tells me, giving the pig-sty one last long look of farewell as she buttons her coat. Next week she'll be attending to the needs of a decrepit old gentleman in Forest Hill: there'll be some incontinence to deal with, and she's expected to push him around the streets for an hour or two every day, but she's not anticipating any behavioural issues and the pay is better. He used to have a big job in the City so he's got a bit of cash stashed away, but he's gay so he's got no children to look after him, which she thinks is one of the sad things about being that way, when you get older and there's no kids to look out for you. Yes, gay isn't the right word, I sadly concur. She's glad I'm moving to the semi-countryside. 'Fresh air, a

change of scene, having the family with you – it'll be better than here,' she says. I'm sure she's right, I answer, before presenting the final envelope. Assessing the size of the bonus by touch, she wishes me good luck. 'Thank you,' I say. I promise I'll write to her. 'That'd be nice,' she replies. From the door she gives me a wave, like a released prisoner at the gates.

An operatic dawn to welcome me: pale peach sun behind miles-wide rungs of amber cloud; fields and trees daubed with diluted honey; in the background, low undulations of indigo hills; jubilant blackbirds. At 5.30 a.m. a garage door slides open as smoothly as an eyelid, releasing a vast black BMW, the first commuter out of the blocks. A few minutes later there's a Mercedes sliding down the slipway of a long stone-paved drive, turning slowly onto the empty street. It's another hour before the station-bound people appear in force: a sudden posse, mostly men, moving right to left. There's even a wife in a front garden, waving the spouse on his way. By 8 a.m. the flow has ceased, more or less. Some smaller cars, driven by women, take to the streets; half a dozen buggy-pushers pass by; the chug of a digger begins, on a site that would appear to be a short distance beyond the right-hand limit of the visual field.

A tractor, listing severely, traverses an expanse of soft dun soil. With not a thought in my head, I'm watching it return when Charlie comes in, bearing breakfast. I assure him that I slept well, which I did. Charlie reiterates that I must treat the house as my own. 'We don't want you spending all day up here,' he says, and at this moment there's a knock and in comes Janina, smiling with such delight you'd have thought she'd feared she might have found me dead in my bed. Behind her stands my hired companion.

Ellen is a considerably larger lady than I had imagined from the photo, and the eyes, dark grey, have a less weary cast than they did in the picture. The slabby upper arms are squeezed by the sleeves of a dress that's patterned with flowers in various shades of lilac, mauve and purple; big white buttons hold it tightly to a big white chest. The shoes aren't right for the ensemble: block-like black things with a ridge around the toes and thick crepe soles – nurse's footwear. It's evident that my mugshot didn't do me justice either. 'Pleased to meet you, Mr Brennan,' she says, blinking too rapidly. 'Oh Christ,' she's thinking, 'this chap looks like something that's melted.' Charlie is pushing a chair forward for her, and she glances at it as if having to remind herself what a chair is for. Janina withdraws. 'Not looking my best today,' I say to Ellen. 'You won't mind if I don't kiss you?' It will take her some time to adjust to the mumbling, but she gets the gist and gives me a queasy smile. Charlie remains with us for ten minutes, having sensed that Ellen may be regretting her decision. Taking charge, he runs through a brief agenda of housekeeping topics: the medication schedule, questions of diet and hygiene. Could the furniture, he asks me, be redeployed in ways more useful to me? All is hunky-dory, I reply. Ellen has the look of a learner driver on her first lesson, waiting for the instructor to turn the ignition key. When I request sandwiches for lunch she concentrates as though committing a code number to memory. If I need anything, I'm to use the buzzer. 'Anything at all,' says Charlie, with much nodding from Ellen.

On the stroke of 1 p.m. Ellen is at the door with a plate of sandwiches. Cheese and bread have been aligned to a tolerance of one millimetre, and the butter has been spread evenly and thinly into every angle of every slice. 'Is there anything else I can do for you?' she asks. 'Shall I stay for a while?'

There's a wariness that suggests she's been warned of a brittle temper. 'I'm fine, thank you,' I reply. 'You're sure?' she asks. I tell her that I am quite sure, and she leaves it at that. At three o'clock, on the dot, she's back: she helps me get up, freshens the bed, dispenses the pharmaceuticals, brings over a couple of books. A tautness around the mouth and jaw betrays the effort of suppressing repugnance; she doesn't chatter. Talk is limited mostly to discussion of the evening meal, which is brought punctually at seven, with a big mug of tea made exactly to specifications. She smiles as she places the mug on the table, remarking that she's never known anyone drink tea so weak. It was like making a martini, she says: she just introduced the tea to the water for a second, like letting the gin get a sniff of the vermouth. She glances at me, trying to assess my reaction. You have to look hard to read my face, because the skin isn't telling you anything, and she can't be sure that her familiarity was appropriate. I begin to understand why Charlie was so taken with her. 'I have a refined palette,' I inform her. I suspect she hears: 'I have a fine parrot.'

At ten she comes to wash me, our last interaction of the day. Very lightly she runs a flannel over my skin. I can see her, reflected in the taps, turning aside as if for air. 'Is this all right?' she asks from time to time. It is: she performs the task with the concentration and delicacy of a bomb-disposal expert. When she closes the door she does it as softly as you'd close the door of a room with a sleeping baby in it.

An ironing board, with an iron on it, has been standing in the bedroom window of a house across the street for three full days now. From time to time I see someone in there; at night the curtains are closed and a light shines through them – so

the room is being used. The head of the bed is against the far wall. So, as they lie in bed, looking towards the window, the occupants see the iron standing to attention, awaiting its next pile of clothes. Depressing.

Again the dream of the walled lawn – the third or fourth time in the past month. As it begins, there is a strong and pleasurable sensation of recognition, but I have no idea of what is going to be seen. The centre of the scene is a sizeable and irregular area of grass, cut as closely as a bowling green, with a high brick wall around it and trees rising behind. It is dusk, and it appears to be a warm evening: people in summer dresses and short-sleeved shirts are standing around the edge of the grass, talking with the air of guests who are waiting for an event to happen. Someone or something is going to appear over the lip of the slope that falls away at the far end of the green, where previously there had been a wall. Beyond this slope can be seen the lights of a town, not far away, but full night has fallen there, while on the lawn it's still dusk. Nobody arrives; nothing happens. In a murmur the people continue to talk; the atmosphere of anticipation leaks away, but everyone seems perfectly content to remain there, talking in the constant dusk. A feeling enters the dream: it seems that whatever was going to happen has in some way, imperceptibly, happened. The trees look like oaks; sometimes there's a tent, a white marquee, which has the aura of a memory, but I don't think I've ever seen it.

When Ellen comes in I ask her: 'Do you have interesting dreams, Ellen?' She is a little surprised, perhaps by the question, perhaps because I've used her name for the first time. She's been calling me Daniel for a few days now.

'Not often,' she replies. 'Shops. I dream about shops quite a lot, and buying food I don't like, or clothes that aren't right. They're not the right size, not the right colour or something, but I have to buy them for some reason.' I can tell she can tell that my face is smiling as clearly as is possible for it. Recently she dreamt about being alone at night in a supermarket where the aisles were so long she couldn't see the end of them. She was walking and walking and walking, pushing an empty trolley, and there was hardly anything on the shelves, just a can here, a box there, a few bottles. 'It was so boring I couldn't bear it,' she says. 'I bored myself awake.' Here I laugh. The sound is more like a cough, but she knows it's a laugh.

I show her what I've written, about the people on the grass. 'What do you think it means?' she asks and I start to tell her that it doesn't mean anything, that it's just something that happened in my head – but I'm incomprehensible, so I write it out for her. 'You see wonderful things when you're asleep,' I say to her, 'but you aren't really seeing, are you? It's enjoyable, but it's not really you that's enjoying it.'

She frowns. 'I don't know about that,' she says, 'but I wouldn't mind having dreams like I used to have when I was a girl. But your brain's losing its fizz when you get to our age, isn't it?'

'Try these,' I suggest, tapping a bottle of tablets, and for a moment, I'm sure, she thought I meant it.

What have we learned today? That it was in the Harajuku district of Tokyo, in the mid-1990s, that young people first began to combine elements of traditional Japanese dress – the *kimono*, the *obi*, *geta* sandals – with custom-made clothes and cast-offs and designer gear. One of the multitudinous styles that arose at

this time was *decora*, in which clothes were hung with toys and plastic jewellery that made a light noise as the wearer walked. Also popular was the 'elegant gothic Lolita' look, which added black lace, corsets and other vampy accoutrements to the well-established 'Lolita' style. Many young women modelled their attire on cartoon characters such as the Sailor Senshi of *Sailor Moon*, one of the most successful creations in the 'magical-girl' sub-genre of *anime* and *manga*, in which young girls combat the forces of evil with their superhuman powers. Here's a twenty-ish girl wearing a red tartan mini-kilt, fat-soled red vinyl boots, a faux-leopardskin stole and a T-shirt hooped with bands of a dozen different colours. Another photo shows six young women who appear to be going for a paedophilic group-sex fantasy kind of look: pigtails; tiny pink miniskirts; huge shaggy boots; hooped candy-bright tights; supertight Minnie Mouse T-shirts. The monthly magazine FRUiTS, established in 1997 by photographer Shoichi Aoki, is essential reading for those interested in the latest developments in Harajuku.

Janina brings me the phone – it's Stephen, with an incident. A profusely bearded man, wearing a full-length black cape fastened around the neck with a thick golden chain, climbed aboard the bus this morning. This gentleman was also wearing, on this blustery and overcast day, a huge pair of sunglasses, of a style one would associate with Jackie Onassis. And he was sucking on the stem of a pipe. There was no pipe – just a stem. Cape-man sprang on board, and inevitably planted himself next to Stephen. He removed the sunglasses, turned to face Stephen, and smiled benignly. He wanted Stephen to understand that plumes of some ethereal substance – invisible to all but this improbable adept – were

dancing on the heads of everyone around them. The reason he had seated himself next to Stephen, he explained, was that Stephen's efflorescence was a remarkable bipartite thing, with one large indigo plume and a much smaller scarlet one alongside. Such bifurcated head-flames were very rare, and in all the years that had passed since the man was granted the gift of being able to discern the plumes, he had never seen one of such beautiful colouration. 'Very, very lovely,' he said, and then he removed himself to the upper deck.

'Remember the mauve lady?' asks Stephen. Indeed I do: the woman with mauve shoes, mauve tights, mauve coat, mauve dress, mauve plastic bangles (about twenty of them), mauve earrings, mauve eye-shadow (lots of it). Having sat beside him without comment all the way from Oxford Circus to Brixton, she suddenly asked, demurely, sweetly: 'How old do you think I am?' Stephen, knocking ten years off the lowest plausible age, answered 'Sixty?' The old lady blinked, as though he were a doctor who'd just broken the news that she was going to expire within the week, and yelled to the driver that she wanted to get off, right away.

Wafts of slow thick drizzle since reveille; the sky a panel of old zinc across its whole extent; fields obscured by grey wash; hills invisible. Janina brings the telescope that my parents gave to Peter for his tenth birthday. 'I thought this might be useful,' she says. I thank her, thinking: 'For what, exactly?' Putting Peter's book of British birds on my table, she tells me there are herons down by the stream. For more than an hour I shun the thing, but then I find myself scanning the farmland and soon, in a gap in the mist, I spot a fox, rain-blackened, dithering on the edge of the copse. For a whole minute it stands

there, considering the dullness, before retreating to the undergrowth. A Land Rover emerges from between the hedgerows of the lane to the farm: when I get it in my sights I see the driver, a middle-aged man, being harangued by his passenger, a scrawny gent in his seventies, who brings his face to the windscreen and bares his teeth at the murk. The woman who waves goodbye to her husband every morning emerges from her house, with trenchcoat belted, huge umbrella aloft and a scarf over her hair – not a look one sees very often nowadays. A heron flies over the hedges on the south side of the farm. Later there's a glimpse of a raptor – a kestrel, I think. In the direction of the ridge there is now the beginnings of a fissure in the cloud, a streak of paler greyness like a trickle of meltwater seen through thick ice. Here, however, we have rain: the quiet chortle of water in the drainpipe is the only sound, other than the occasional evidence of Janina about her business downstairs. Oh yes, there can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still.

Janina and Charles, Ellen reports, would like me to spend more time with them. Perhaps this evening we could all eat together? I appreciate the offer, I answer, but this evening I have other plans. She tells me how much she likes my brother and his wife: they've really made her feel like one of the family. I'm very pleased to hear it.

'Perhaps tomorrow evening?' she asks.

'Perhaps tomorrow evening what?'

'You could come downstairs.'

'We'll see.'

'They really would like it,' she goes on. There's more on the kindness of Janina and Charlie; much use of 'really'.

'They are saints, but I'm tired,' I tell her. 'Please leave me alone.' She goes without a word, like an actress following the director's orders.

The state of Minnesota has some 15,000 lakes and its name means 'sky-tinted water'. ('From the waterfall he named her, Minnehaha, Laughing Water.') The state bird is the Common Loon, *Gavia immer*, otherwise known as the Great Northern Diver. The state butterfly is the Monarch, the state fish the Walleye, and the state flower the Pink and White Showy Lady Slipper. A roll-call of eminent Minnesotans: Bob Dylan, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Charles Lindbergh, Prince, Charles Schulz.

By way of an apology, I ask Ellen if her accommodation is to her liking. 'It is,' she replies, briskly removing the sheets from the bed. Eye contact so far has been perfunctory. She tells me that she and Janina are going to redecorate the room at the weekend.

'So you're not planning on leaving before me?' I ask.

'No,' she states. 'I'm not.'

I ask if the music bothers her.

'Sandra warned me,' she answers.

I'd had no idea that she'd been debriefed by her predecessor; I want to know more.

'She said you like to have noise around you,' says Ellen.

'Noise?' I roar, faux-furious, but as I'm making the sound I realise that only I can tell it's fake. 'It's Scarlatti, for crying out loud.' This comes out as gibberish: the ulcers are making a hash of the enunciation.

'What?' asks Ellen.

I point to the CD box. 'What else did Sandra tell you?'

'Nothing much,' says Ellen.

This cannot be true. 'Tell,' I say.

'She said she could never understand how you could read with a radio on, and another radio blaring next door.'

I point out that when you walk down the street there's stuff going on all around you: people talking, music coming out of cars and shops, and while all that's going on you're seeing adverts and glimpses of newspapers and magazines and TVs in shop windows. 'Think of it as an indoor street,' I tell her.

It takes a while for me to say this, and Ellen listens attentively, frowning, as if listening to someone to whom English does not come easily. When I've finished she says: 'But you don't read in the street, do you?'

'OK. But you read in the park, no?'

'Suppose so,' she says, unpersuaded, smoothing the fresh bedlinen.

'Sandra hated this stuff,' I tell her. She knows Sandra hated it. 'What about you?' I ask.

'Sounds like a mad person throwing cutlery down the stairs,' she says. 'I'll go and get your breakfast.'

Ambroise Paré on the meaning of dreams: 'Those who abound with phlegm dream of floods, snows, showers and inundations, and falling from high places . . . Those who abound in blood dream of marriages, dances, embracings of women, feasts, jests, laughter, or orchards and gardens.'

The quartet dines together, and Charlie produces a fine bottle of Burgundy to mark the occasion. I dribble profusely; the

food – a nice-looking assemblage of chicken fillets and pine nuts and raisins and rice – tastes of oatmeal. Ellen cuts up my portion of meat with the minimum of fuss. Conversation sporadic and unrelaxed; I'd rather be in my room. Charlie is giving Ellen a summary of his day at the office when the doorbell rings. Janina answers, and returns two minutes later, nicely flushed. The caller was some horrible woman who wants to become a local councillor, she says. There's a rumour that the council is going to be taking a lot of asylum seekers, and this woman thinks our money should be spent on better things – things that benefit us, the community. Janina called her a Nazi and sent her away with a flea in her ear. 'There are so many people like that around here,' Janina informs Ellen. 'They want the government to crack down on the immigrants, but they're happy to pay a Polish girl a pittance to keep their house spick and span.' Charles gives her a light slap on the shoulder. 'That's my girl,' he says, pulling a face of comic alarm. 'My wife likes a scrap,' he says, 'but I'll do anything for a quiet life. Mr Risk-Averse, that's me.' Janina says this isn't true – he'd taken risks with the business, and they'd paid off. A brief passage of affectionate bickering ensues, for Ellen's benefit.

Ellen out for an hour in the morning, to meet Roy, the ex-husband. They have one or two things to discuss; nothing major, she says. She suggests that I might like to sit in the garden, as it's such a nice day. I stay in my room instead, reading in the chair by the window. At twelve I see Ellen at the end of the road; viewed through the telescope, her face suggests that the encounter has not gone well. 'Everything OK?' I enquire, when she brings in the lunch.

'Fine,' she says.

'Not how it looked,' I say.

'That's just the way the face hangs,' she answers. 'It's all going south.'

'Tell me.'

'There's nothing to say.'

It's obvious that she and Roy argued. 'Tell me, please,' I wheedle. 'Come on, tell me,' I go on, irritatingly.

'That's enough, Daniel,' says Ellen. 'Behave.'

Tanizaki writes that the Japanese sensibility prefers tarnished silver to polished, the shadowy lustre of jade to the crass glitter of precious stones. The gold decoration of Japanese lacquer-work, he says, must be seen in candlelight, not in the glare of electricity.

Ellen is drying my back and I notice, reflected in the window, her gaze slipping over the skin. A wince of pity, and I can almost hear the question being whispered: 'I wonder who you'd be if you didn't look like this?' Answer: 'Well, I wouldn't exist, would I?'

I tell her about the count and countess, a long time ago in Italy, who had a daughter who was a dwarf. They raised her in a house in which all the staff were dwarves, and never allowed her out, so she grew up thinking that her parents were giants. Not sure if I've read this story or made it up. The former, I think.