

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 31 (1963)
Heft: 12

Artikel: Old sock blues
Autor: Owen, Jason
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-570875>

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OLD SOCK BLUES

by JASON OWEN

I write sitting in a bar which always before I have despised, from which I have held myself even arrogantly aloof. This now is perhaps the crumble of capitulation, the sure and swift slide down from composure and control; and it has happened in so very few weeks. Delights of first and false happiness have been followed by a turmoil of disbelief and despair, and envelopment by as fast a snowball as ever plunged a man to humility, if not to degradation. Come to rest, it has landed me here—a wreck amidst the débris of an existence—in this bar on this Monday September evening, its skies already dimming with the year and the first autumnal chills presaging the certain frost around the corner: a dimming and a chilling appropriate to what has happened to me and to what brings me here tonight, my whole emotional system so whisked up to its present pitch that it seems as if never again can it settle back into the comparative calm of so many years when it simmered more evenly on a lower jet. Now I have been brought to a merciless boil, but allowed only minutes of satisfied steam. I am left the victim of relentless restlessness and roused, remembered desires.

But already the prelude is portentously over-long and over-intense for what is, after all, nothing but a sad, sapping little affair of the heart (however deeply felt)—from which, had I only known, had I been able to credit the imminence of such pain, bewilderment and dejection, only minutes and yards ahead of me, I should have run in terror one thousand miles . . .

For o how I hesitated: I had been too much hurt in the past (and with more nobility) and I had all the wariness of the wounded animal. The situation in which I suddenly found myself that shining summer night two months ago was indeed every bit as unexpected as it was unsought. It was not a rôle in which I had ever seen myself: 'protector'. And it was little initial self-comfort to say that it takes two to play any game, that I was scarcely the marauder, that the first overture had not even been mine. I had the responsibility of quite definite seniority; and I kept looking at the picture through the eyes of my more conventional friends and sympathising with their reactions to what they saw (if they had been able to see it). For he did look so very young.

But it was o such comfort and such sweetness to like and—more important at my age—to be liked. (Although, it was very difficult to understand the enthusiasm of the other's liking: one tried very hard to think how it would have been had our ages been reversed, and only understood the less.) But honey is so rare, and life is so short, that I just did not dare deny myself the taste of it.

And how very sweet those first tastes so light-heartedly were: the smiles and smiles and smiles as we lay so tenderly making our love. I, who after all my unemotional sorties was by now a fairly proficient sexual mechanic, became almost clumsy as a lover with a new shyness which all my tenderness and all my protective feelings towards his seeming defencelessness aroused in me: protective feelings which I found so

significant and which made me think that perhaps this was even a bridge back (for surely it could not last forever?) to a functionally procreative manhood. Nearly always before, my attractions had been towards those of a similar age to my own (was this not true, uncomplicated inversion?). It was only a year ago, a chance visitor to the gilding city of Amsterdam, that I had been made very certainly to realise that, at 35, my very age could be a magnet to a younger man. Subsequent eager visits to the same city had only confirmed this, developed in me affinities which I had not guessed that I possessed, have brought me foolhardily to this little disaster on my own doorstep.

It was in fact the very similarity—in glowing darkness, in compact build—between Kenneth Massari and the Spanish Marcos with whom I had known brief but indelible, even unimagined, delights of body and mind in the Amsterdam of a summer before, which drew me to him so quickly in that dreary provincial Saturday night bar: in this city a meeting-place for the 'bent' (generally the less young and the less attractive), but tempered into a certain heterogeneity by a sprinkling of genuine old dears of both genders (one wondered how much they guessed as they glanced amiably around, or whether they were relics of a far more innocent age), and peppered by the burlesque waggishness of a racy, volatile barmaid.

But, even 'down there' in that below-stairs haven, I only ever saw myself, like Isherwood, as 'on a visit'; held myself perhaps even a little despicably aloof from my 'own kind'. Only seldom was I in conversation; but always I felt relaxed beneath the wink of its ambiguities. In no way was I tempted by the tarted-up drabness, the airs and graces and the glanced amiably around, or whether they were relics of a far more notorious for its similar tastes and offerings.

But I sit here, surely enough, tonight . . .

*

I am not a conceited man, for I have been a man too often rebuffed. The fortune which immediately and esoterically connected Kenneth Massari and myself across a bar-room floor was not indeed for immediate belief; I was to awake some hours later, alone in my own bed in my unprivate home, and with a start of wonder—and of fear—to realise . . . He had done me—this creature of bright youth and smouldering beauty—the large compliment of being even more eager than wary I. My ego rose, my heart sang and my body tingled. We had smiled, we had talked, we had exchanged drinks and then we walked the late-night city streets until the last train to the respectable suburb which cocoons my existence. Lightly and furtively in the shell of a demolished slum cottage, where we had gone to empty the beer from our bladders, he kissed me like an affectionate puppy dog; and we made a rendezvous for the following Monday night, when I planned that my home would be briefly and duplicitously free to receive him.

Throughout the weekend in-between every thought and every urge looked only ahead to the time and the place named. Throughout the day of assignation I thought: I must be careful how I cross the roads today. I must not risk death until this has happened!

And when we did meet, when he was there and I was there at the appointed hour and spot, he said, with a roguish grin: 'Did you think that I wouldn't come?' And I grinned back (although with the sad look at the back of my eyes which was already and irremovably there) and 'One can never be sure' I said.

How ominously true my words were to be (the look at the back of my eyes more justified than my grin)!

One looks back now and sees the errors of one's tactics (but tactics were exactly what one thought that one didn't need). For instance: after those first hours of shy loving and exploration it was practically a fortnight before we met again. And it was I who consciously held the key, who thought I could hesitate and debate (for I knew how completely my life must change, how public my allegiance must become: it could not be an idle decision). What a madness of presumption it now seems to have thought that I had all the time in my world, that I could afford to consider, to breathe (even had a sudden serious illness in my home not overnight tied me to it more than ever) . . . But, after a week, letters were at least exchanged (one was wary then even of the test of the telephone). In his letter to me, Kenneth Massari wrote: 'As you rightly stress, honesty is the best foundation to build any friendship on. If you were to start any other way, it would be like building a new house on top of a old sea wall, the first storm to hit it would crash it away completely and that would only be a waste of time and time is too precious to be thrown away on things that are doomed for destruction. And is time a thing we have? . . . Knowing how a person thinks, knowing when a person is hurt, happy or contented, even when they don't show these things by word or deed, sharing in all their emotions with them and yet not expecting any such feelings in return. That is how well I should like to know you.'

It was on written words like those—simple, unlettered, in a very immature hand, but seeming so strong and sincere—that, fingers over my nose and plunging deep, I sold my self-possession and my calm; touched, flattered; old fool, new fool . . .

It was indeed three whole weeks before we were able actually to make love again, although we met in the meantime and each time reaffirmed our feeling for each other: of a Saturday night in the below-stairs bar; sometimes of a week-night, parked on the headland overlooking the docks in the elderly car which he drove (even though I was 15 years older than him, I didn't even have one to park or drive), when we'd sit and talk and perhaps, when it got eventually darker, clasp hands and furtively kiss. After that second time of marvellous nakedness, sweetness, shamelessness, he wrote me another letter (which must have cost him a little effort, for he was not infected with this verbal diarrhoea which may really have been the final cause of my small private disaster in losing him; for it was with my pen that I was forced eventually to fight to keep him). And in that second letter he wrote: 'Just a very short note to thank you for your kindness and patience, which you showed towards me last night. If I gave the impression of being (I use your word) saucy then, I didn't mean to be, it was a form of defence against the feeling I was so afraid to show. Feelings that I would normally have

called idiotic and twisted if shown towards another man. Then I began to think how much better it was to have such emotions for a person with whom you went to bed with. Otherwise it would be just a case of lust (for the body and not the person) and sheer satisfaction, a level I hope to God I never reach. I hope you are not attracted to me for these two reasons; if so; I think I would rather end our friendship now (although it would be a hard thing for me to do) than have any part in such a degrading affair. I really don't believe you think of me like that (or am I just being wishful?) for it was your kindness and patience last night that helped me to reach this conclusion. The next fortnight will be dull and I will go as far and say *empty*, without your 'phone calls and our little mid-week meetings (and Saturdays) which I enjoy so much. Please look after yourself while away and don't get into any *bad* company. I will be thinking of you and looking forward to our next time together. Lots of love—K M'

*

For I was going away on a holiday, long-planned and which there seemed no rational reason to cancel (if one cannot trust for a fortnight...). As I waited on the platform of my home-, provincial-city station for the London train which would take me on my first step towards Europe, I called him by telephone (as I now did with daily eagerness) —just to speak with him once again, make contact. Had I known that things would never again be quite the same, that that was the end of true and secure delight, I should have let the train come and go, and have gone on, talking, talking... But I didn't know, didn't suspect... Now, as I emerge each evening from my commuting train, I see that kiosk into which I used to rush then and dial so excitedly his number; and forlornly I remember...

I remember that, when I met him, Kenneth Massari was what one might call 'innocent': one 'experience' only he had had, the first time he'd got drunk (he hadn't been drinking very long either)—which he had 'hated'. But that he was not unwilling for another, with a better chosen person, was obvious from his presence in that bar that night, along with his little Pandarus of a friend, the two of them out on a naughty quest of what was what, saucy but reticent. To me it seemed quite certain that he must have further homosexual experience (although he wouldn't necessarily agree); and all I wanted was that he should have it with me... It was indeed only the responsibility which I felt for him in his seemingly defenceless youth, as he hovered on the brink of what I saw as a jungle—which allowed me, in terms of conscience, to pursue a relationship with him at all.

And I think of him now and the tarnishing changes which so very few weeks have brought: and how, when it comes to it, within but twenty-four hours an existence can splinter and crack. And I wonder how I managed to get so old and still stay so naïf and trusting. And then I ask myself whether one can fairly accuse the young of being heartless, when they haven't had time to learn what a heart is and how it can suffer. But then I consider that, even in the very young, deficiency in potential pity is a pretty serious flaw. And—lousy with self-pity—I even

wonder if someone had not fixed me with an evil eye in a dark Spanish street . . . !

I remember the day I returned from the continent to Westport after those two weeks of holiday. All the way from London the five numbers, which would ring his telephone bell, and connect me with him once more, danced in my brain, my fingers only itching to dial their sequence. In my pocket bulged the present I'd brought back for him. He'd heard from me twice while I'd been away (would it have made any difference if I'd written daily?—but I didn't want to frighten him with over-ardency!): proof to me of how much he'd dominated my thoughts in that far-away place, where I used to bring out his picture (in four poses from one of those florin-in-the-slot station machines) and re-read his two letters to me as I lay back on my solitary hotel bed in the heat of siesta time.

Immediately I sensed something guarded in his voice. When, with a conventional lover's banter, I asked: 'Been good?', my heart chilled at his evasive reply: 'You do ask awkward questions, don't you! But I'll see you tonight, won't I? I've been banking on that,' he added. 'There's something I must say to you then.'

And I remember that night. We met in the bar where first we'd met and drank and laughed and were physically electrically conscious of each other. But the shadow of whatever it was that would later, more privately, be said was upon me.

After closing time we wandered together under the railway line (which forms a frontier between town and dockland) to the West Dock. It is a spot quite deserted and squalidly romantic even: the moon shining on the black, still water can make it look almost Venetian and the crescent of abandoned warehouses skirting it quite Roman. We had found it on another Saturday night at a similar hour and with a similar need. (When one loves and seeks places in which to make it, how well one discovers a city, even a city one has known all one's life—in what new lights, in what new shades.)

Yes, I remember the West Dock, for I have returned there since, sadly alone; and, somewhat drunk, I've soliloquised out into the deserted night on my sadness. A policeman on a prowl of duty disturbed me there only last Saturday, as I stood on a little bridge over the rivulet which feeds the dock. He thought it his place to enquire what I did there.

'I'm just looking at a dying dock,' I said; and he mounted his bicycle very quickly and rode off into the rest of the night. He obviously didn't want to be involved with nutters . . .

I remember what Kenneth Massari told me that Saturday night of my return: how, during the first of the two weeks that I'd crazily been away from him, he'd stayed in every night, read the book I'd lent him (bookish old me, who might better have furnished an old-fashioned chastity belt!). But then something had broken: rightly or wrongly. I blamed his little Pandarus friend. Together, their reticent little sorties had suddenly (it was a bank holiday) become less restrained; they'd hit the big time, graduated to the more 'impressive' bar, been fêted, experienced car-rides and parties. It had all left its mark, excited him, made him much less sure of what he felt for me. I was understanding, but saddened. But how

much worse it could have been: it was, after all, very honest and only a warning. Not complacently, but accepting the challenge, I thought: Now that I'm back, near him. . . And, although the days which followed were uneasy ones for me, six nights later at the moment of parting, standing beneath that bridge which carries the main line and forms the frontier, he looked up at me and said: 'Everyone I meet I compare with you and no one comes within miles. I just don't know how I shall get through until tomorrow . . .' I held my breath in utmost humility and then very solemnly I said: 'All I desire in this world is contained between your beautiful black-haired bonce and the chisel-toes of your shoes.'

I remember the Saturday evening at 6 o'clock—just over a fortnight ago, was it?—at the hour when one begins to wind oneself up for the great myth of the week. I stood in a telephone kiosk and (no kid) I just wanted to die. It was only the evening after—the evening he had not known how to get through until—and I was ringing to find out where we would meet. But he couldn't meet me, he said; after he had left me, he had met someone else . . .

After half an hour of reasoning and pleading, evasion and duplicity, he had finally given me that chiselled toe of his shoe. The receiver then, agonisedly, placed down and only the hollowness of the box surrounding me, my heart literally ached and it almost hurt to breathe. Like a man haunted and dazed, I made my way in a numb stumble to the old wine-bar tucked away in one of the city's arcades and, there, sat on a high stool at the bar, I stared at glass after glass of cheap yellow Spanish wine in front of me and tragically downed them. 'What's wrong, dear?' asked the traditional, sympathetic, dyed-yellow-haired barmaid. 'You look sad tonight.' Then she added her good-natured barmaid's cliché: 'Don't worry: it may never happen; and, if it already has, there's nothing you can do about it!'

It had and there wasn't (although I went on desperately trying—by telephone call, by note . . .).

I remember most painfully of all the last time we met, only a matter of nights ago. He had deigned to see me again before going on his own holiday; although he made no secret of his lack of eagerness, both when he agreed and during the meeting—rationed to half-an-hour in his parked car in a public place.

It was a half-hour of continually watched watch (Harry, my successor, was waiting), almost studiedly callous insult. As I sat there looking at his wonderful profile, every opening I made—and I was trying so hard—being cruelly twisted into my disfavour, I tried putting words into his mouth which would excite my compassion: 'I've got to know that I arouse these fierce affections and desires. How can I help it? I'm besieged with offers all the time; and it's inevitable that I hurt someone or other—although, God knows, I don't want to. It's in fact quite frightening to arouse these passions; and even though I know it's my youth and prettiness, which will not last forever, it's difficult not to get just a little hard, smug and blasé with so much lavished availability. And indeed I am a little worried about the development of my heart, which I'm sure has already a small crust forming over it.'

But he didn't say that. What he did say was: 'I told you once that I never forgave anyone who hurt me.' Perhaps he had. I just didn't recall: it must have seemed so irrelevant at the time. How indeed could I have thought it possible that I should ever 'hurt' him as we lay there gazing at each other and smiling and smiling . . . And indeed for those moments it was completely out of my head (just as he seemed himself completely and conveniently to have forgotten it) that it was he who had almost brutally started any hurting that there had been. 'I should have told you what you were doing to me, over the telephone, by note . . .' he continued. And I looked down at my right wrist and, if it had hurt him so much, well, I wanted nothing but to cut it right off. I told him so, and he turned his face to me for perhaps the first time that night and his eyes were iced up with malice and contempt: 'Why?' he said—'you want to be a writer, don't you?'

It was shortly after that—his pointedly glancing at his watch yet again—that I'd had even more than I could take. I suddenly opened the door and dropped from the car without looking back, not being able to resist slamming the door behind me. I knew immediately and sickly with the certainty of a suicidee who has just swallowed poison and regrets it: now you really have ended it all . . .

It was a wonder that I didn't trip up the steps which lay in my path, the umbrella and brief-case which I was carrying seeming so cumbersome and such symbols of a premature elderliness. I thought of Emil Jannings and Lola-lola.

*

It is helping to write it all down. In fact, I feel suddenly calm enough to ask myself the big question: what it has all been about? And I think I know. It has been a belly-blow to my ego, to hope and to trust; the very real shock of a coitus interruptus, emotionally and physically (the snatching of the spoon roughly from the very mouth); the probably quite naïf bewilderment that affections can be transferred in the very middle of the act, as it were, before the protestations of those affections and of that desire have even died. The element of my bewilderment has perhaps been largest of all.

And what have I discovered about myself? Why has it been such a splintering little disaster for me? It must be that I am the 'committer'—latently or actually. I may hesitate and I may very rarely commit; but—when I do—I sink my whole self. It is not then a commitment by halves—but one which would very easily involve sacrifice of limb and even of life.

An absolute devotion; but not one that need suffocate unless twisted and brutally and prematurely rebuffed . . .

When someone suddenly of his own volition got under the long nurtured and well preserved crust of my self-sufficiency, snuggled up with a new intimate warmth, and that someone was not only of considerable youth but also considerable beauty, the compliment and the comfort were just not to be resisted. It is the briefest teasing taste which was allowed which has led to crack-up. That is what it has been about.

But I am quite safe being here tonight, since I choose now to come here—no longer caring, wanting only to immerse myself. I thought I

was safe last night, when I sat in that corner over there, quietly reading: a phoney assumption of dignified remoteness from the chatter and the capers. And then suddenly I looked up and saw him in bewitching profile crossing the floor behind his new friend and lover; and my breath caught at his beauty just as if a stiletto had entered my side. I had thought him already hundreds of miles away, crossing France. But obviously I had mistaken the day of his departure. I fled then like that cat that once was scalded: I just couldn't stand to stay on, so agonising the total ache of me.

But tonight he must be already on the other side of the English Channel, heading south to his late southern sunshine: so I can sit here, relaxedly and shrug-shoulderedly, lost to this coterie membership, to wearing my colours at last brightly on my sleeve. I don't particularly seek any company, want just to sit and sip my thick, black guinness and try to capture how and why it has been, as if by writing it down I may actually exorcise as much as I can from my haunted system. The night is still reasonably young, even for a prematurely castrated and castrating British night; the true habitués have not really yet started to arrive. There is time yet for more words, and for more treackly, comforting guinness. My glass is even now empty, so I'd best go up to the bar and have it filled . . .

*

No!

My eyes will not really believe it; that, as I stand here, ordering at the bar, it really is him, there at the far end of the room, centre of an admiring group, including my successor: shining black haired, smouldering brown eyed, brimful of superficial, conscienceless happiness and youthful verve. And no! It cannot really be that he is now hoisting himself up onto a radiator where his twittering group is standing, so that he may better be seen from where I am disconsolately standing . . .

And I've been served my guinness and I've drunk the thick, black stuff down in gulps, in a way in which it is really too heavy to drink it; and I've ordered more and drunk that down in a similar way; all the time staring, staring, as though I still don't believe and as some sort of expression of my pitiful disgust and hurt and bewilderment. For once more—a blow right in my belly—I know that (still here in this city) he has lied to me; and I have to know—for all my reasoning—how much I still, without help, care.

As I drink each glass down—my writing showing increasing signs of drunkenness; my comparative, assumed restfulness quite lost—directing relentlessly my (must be) almost wild eyes in that one direction—I know more than ever that I am degrading myself. It is small consolation that eventually I have penetrated and caused a certain discomfort (as perhaps anyone behaving in the way that I am allowing myself to behave must): that the small Pandarus of a friend (still in tow) has had the decency to blush in embarrassment. But I am going on drinking and staring, staring and drinking . . .

'You poor bloody old sock!' I mumble wryly to myself; and I realise now that the bloke on the stool beside me heard. And even I can scarcely read any more what I am writing, what I have written . . .