

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 35 (1967)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Age and a half : a fraction of libido
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-567425>

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AGE AND A HALF a fraction of libido

The man stood alone in the esoteric place of libidinous tryst. It was known of for that purpose only to an underworld minority of the city, containing many unexpected members who would sidle discreetly through the door and down the stairs: such as the man. He had heard that soon it would be demolished, as so many other such corners and accommodat-ingly familiar bars in the city already had been. He was beginning to feel not so very much at home—on native ground but in a new decade. He wondered what he would do after its disappearance, denied what in such a treacherously precarious little world could not seriously be called a safety valve; but which was at least a valve of possibility and convenience. In the meantime, while it was still there, he had resolved to make best use of it. So, most evenings, on his way from work, when he had to change trains in the city he looked in; no longer with the guilt or the attempt at self-restraint or the feeling of shabbiness, if not degradation, which had characterised his reactions to it and his use of it in the earlier years after his first introduction that Saturday night in his mid-20s, when he had been lonely wandering the damp, lightreflecting pre-Christmas streets. Then for the first time he had gone down the stairs, past the bar-door, up the incline, turned left and down a corridor and in through the door at the end. One of the advantages of the place was that all those who approached could always be heard and far enough away for all compromising situations to be adjusted before anyone else came through the door. The man knew the noises so well: the swing-doors at street level rattling open and banging shut, the foot-steps down the stairs, warning if it were necessary to warn, otherwise disappointing (if they turned off into the bar with another bang-to of swing-doors) or arousing expectation (if they continued on up the incline over that telling creaking board), making one brace oneself to imminent possibility. It had all been going on for so long; he had always told himself how dicey a fool's paradise it was and expected the police to close it down long, long before any demolition squad laid its hands upon it.

As so often before, he stood there, brief-case in hand, a saucily 'with-it' (he hoped) corduroy hat upon his head above his now greying side-temples, his short continental-bought raincoat tied around his waist with its narrow belt. (During those first years of adjustment to such clandestine involvement he had not been so conscious of his appearance and its age-grouping.) 'Whatever turns up or doesn't turn up,' he told himself, 'I must catch the next train'—which would take him out of the city into the truss of suburbia. Already he had missed two, hanging on, hopefully, mechanically randy. But, given no interruption, it could often all be so quickly over: spendthrift manufactured passion, intimacy of mouth and organ with complete stranger or with someone who had neither mental nor physical appeal: merely the available. It was complete and utter promiscuity, whoredom. He knew it, but no longer worried one jot (as once he so much had) or even gave it a thought: sex just like a shit and damn

all the earth-moving significance talked about it and the neurotically over-emphasising christian guilt. True, he would have welcomed the security of closed doors. But lately his path had not been so marked by razor-blade encounters with the law, with robbery or even beat-ups down dark alleyways into which, abandoning all sense and control, he had sometimes allowed himself to be lured. And, if they occasionally did happen, he no longer even bothered to resolve to keep himself cleaner, safer; but wrote it all off to experience, to increased sadness, if not wisdom. As well as security, he would have welcomed even more a little affection and sympathy and cosiness; he knew that he would then feel a little more bathed and self-respecting. But it didn't happen that way; so he took clinically and dispassionately what there was—down the stairs, up the incline, along the corridor. If he had ever been asked to attempt explanation of why so many men (and Christ! how many there anonymously were) expressed themselves in this way, he would have offered these: the ease, the speed, the lack of fore- and after-complication. This way was such complete, rounded simplicity—if you knew the ropes, had come by chance on the wave-length. And that it so much was: chance. How much bigger the clan, the devotees of such simplicity, would be if more, while merely wandering down a winter street. . . .

What turned up that night was a boy: whom he'd seen once or twice before and got as far then as a wink and a gesture before interruption after the procession of warning noises. The boy showed his recollection of those previous occasions by an immediate glimmer of recognition from his eyes, the colour and shape of almonds. Indeed they shone with youth and fitness. But, before there was even time for renewal of wink and gesture, there was once more interruption. The boy did up his fly and went to move off; but he looked back. The man mouthed the word: 'Upstairs'. Evidently the boy didn't understand, for he gave a puzzled frown. The man repeated the word and this time got a nod. He followed the boy along the corridor, down the incline, up the broad echoing wooden stairs and through the slamming glass doors: out into the autumn night. The boy was waiting for him a few feet away on the main street's pavement. Immediately, without any subterfuge, he approached.

«How are you, then?» he said confidently in the local accent.

«Hi!» said the man (hoping that that greeting went with his hat).

«The same old problem . . .» he then hazarded after a pause.

«What's that, then?» enquired the boy.

«Where to go, of course. Know anywhere?»

«Well, I knows a few places, like,» said the boy. «I don't like them toilets, since I got caught once, like.»

«Lord! What happened?»

«I got away. The other fellow didn't though—poor sod! But I'm slippery and I got out of the copper's grasp and ran like 'ell.»

«What did he catch you up to?»

«Let's just say we was having fun; and plenty!» answered the boy. «I'll leave it to your imagination. I expect you got one!»

«Anyway, where're we going now?» asked the man, as they kept on walking.

«Well, there's a place down one of the wharfs I knows, where it's nice and dark.»

«But surely it's not safe there?» said the man. «Have you been there many times?»

«You bet!» said the boy. «I told you it was dark, didn't I?—and I got good ears. You coming?»

«All right,» said the man, after just a slight hesitation; «if you say it's safe.» And he thought: 'Christ, what a fool! When will you ever learn, man...!' And he felt his wallet secure in his inside pocket, his watch fast around his wrist, tightened his grip on his brief-case which could so easily be snatched from his hand—just as if it contained secret documents instead of a tory newspaper, a heterosexual novel, some unimportant papers and the sandwiches which he'd forgotten to eat at mid-morning. 'There's still time to catch that next train,' he thought. But he nevertheless followed the boy, who had now leapt out into the tail-end of the rush-hour traffic and was proceeding jauntily towards the frontier of dockland, in the opposite direction to that of the station—to safety and seclusion and stagnation.

«Christ, but you're slow!» said the boy when the man joined him on the opposite pavement.

«I didn't want to get killed before...» said the man, attempting a waggishness which went unrecognised.

«You want to see me nip in and out of traffic!» crowed the boy. Everything he bumptiously came out with made the man distrust him a little more and bewail his own imbecility. Nevertheless he kept on walking beside him, past the indian and chinese and maltese cafés which had started now in an intermittent thread, as they passed together beneath the railway bridge, a chance man-made frontier, beyond which was social ghetto.

«Just finished work, have you?» asked the boy and, without waiting for affirmation, he went on: «I couldn't carry one of them cases around! You works in an office, I suppose?»

«Yes,» agreed the man. «And what do you do?»

«I works in a shop—a butcher's shop.»

«What they call you?» asked the boy.

«Dave,» said the man. He didn't even bother to lie, although he did give the more familiar, abbreviated form of his name, hoping that that also went with his hat. He was also, he noticed, trying to do something about his accent, tone it down a bit, de-posh it; not that there was much to be done to disguise those upper-crust-timbres. Certainly to drop the odd little aitch was pretty futile.

«And yours?» he enquired.

«You'd better call me Sandy,» said the boy, «'cos you wouldn't be able to say my proper name—it's Welsh.»

«Try me,» said the man.

But the boy ignored the offer. «Christ, but you're short!» he said, eyeing the man up and down.

«You're not so bloody tall yourself!» retorted the man—calculating about two inches' difference; although he did have the disadvantage of being on the side where the antiquated pavement dipped right down.

«How long have you been on this game?» asked the man, always interested in the case-book aspect of his underworld: it seemed to be a consolation prize.

«Six years,» said the boy, completely open, completely uncagey.

«I was seduced by the school milk-man,» he volunteered proudly.

«He was a smasher! When I was thirteen,» he added. «That makes me nineteen now.»

'Exactly half my age,' thought the man.

«How old you?» asked the boy. «Forty-five?»

«No, not as much as that,» said the man, sadly. «My hair's gone grey quickly,» he added.

«Anything over 21's ancient, though, isn't it?» suggested the boy. «I'll be 20 next year.»

«What you doing with me now, then?» asked the man.

«Age don't worry me so much,» said the boy. «If I likes the bloke's more important.»

The man had been taken in before by far more effusive protestations than that one.

They had crossed another road and were now burrowing further into dockland, past deserted warehouses and disused quays. Suddenly the man recognised where they were headed; but it didn't hurt him any more, he noted with passing interest. He remembered standing there in wind and rain, drunk, tearful, the usually still black water being whipped up over the stone quays by storm—it must have been all of two years ago. He had returned then morosely to the spot which he used to visit with Victor, the Italian boy who had made him briefly whole and then torn him brutally in two. They had never penetrated further into the maze than this, had chosen to remain a little more securely within reach of the frontier, had merely dallied together there, ludicrously tender in transitory moonlight.

«The West Dock, isn't it?» said the man, knowing so fully well that it was.

«I don't bloody know!» said the boy. «One dock or other...»

There was an edge of aggressiveness to his voice which had not been there when street-lighting had lit their way. The man was just registering this with a light chilling when his arm was grasped and he was pushed to one side.

«Watch the puddle!» said the boy.

Avoiding puddles, they were now treading a path very near the edge of the black water. Suddenly the boy stopped: «Like a swan for breakfast?» he incongruously asked, and pointed to where in the darkness some mistily white objects glided ghostily, eerily. Apart from the voice of the boy there was no sound whatsoever. They were quite alone.

They came to a little foot-bridge over a tributary which fed black water into the dock, which was as doomed as the belowstairs haven in the centre of the changing city. As they crossed it, the man looked back in the only direction in which some light could still be seen. With a start, he saw at the top of a lane beside the tributary a boy with a dog

standing quite still, watching. 'Christ!' he thought, 'there's his accomplice ...' He stopped quite still on the bridge.

«Come on!» he heard called ahead of him. «Where you got to?»

The boy and his dog seemed to have disappeared. He followed Sandy into the further darkness. Now the path beside the black, oily water was very narrow indeed and they had to make their way very gingerly along it. As he concentrated on his balancing, the man felt dangerously encumbered by his brief-case and even by his corduroy hat. Fortunately there was a moon, even if it was filtered by drizzle-threatening cloud.

Sandy spoke again. His question was loaded, as heavy as a body dropping deep into the dock. «Can you swim?» he asked.

The man lied: «Like a fish!» he called ahead.

«I'd sink half way across!» chorled Sandy in reply; and the menace in the night air was lightened a little by his humour.

They turned a corner along another dock-linking rivulet and then they climbed onto another bridge and, deftly and with complete assurance, Sandy led the way along an intricately winding route further into darkness and desolation. But there was no longer the hazard of a false step plunging into irrevocable, wet depths. Past more warehouses, they walked now along a cobbled roadway. «Do you always wear steel tips on your bloody shoes?» enquired the boy.

«Why? Am I making too much noise?»

«Walk on your toesies!» said the boy—«unless you got tips there as well.»

They came then to a derelict lavatory beside the water, built for the former boom-times when the dock had been in use. This it seemed was their destination: «The only one where I ever feels safe,» confided Sandy. «Luxurious, ain't it! See! there's even a skylight.»

But, unlike Sandy, the man didn't feel safe. He strained his ears for stealthy footsteps, awaited the arrival of the confederate boy with his snarling dog, regretted now the moonlight, wished the opening to the lavatory faced the way they had come, so to give him vantage of view.

But there they were, so: 'Let's get on with it,' he thought, uneagerly. «Give us a handful!» he said in an idiom not typical of him. The boy evidently misunderstood or was perhaps merely mischievous. He reached out his hand and squeezed the man's thrust towards him. Out of the darkness his almond eyes glimmered with spirited fitness.

«Do you want to ...?» he asked, guiding the man's hand to show what he meant.

«If you like,» replied the man, but obviously not afire.

«Do you want to or don't you?!» demanded the boy.

«Yes»: this time a little more eagerness was simulated.

«What are you doing now?» he followed up, as he saw the boy feeling at the top of a door-frame.

«Looking for somewhere where I can hang from my bloody feet, of course!» retorted the boy. And just for a moment the man believed him, tried to imagine the contortions in which he might shortly be involved.

The boy took off his raincoat and his jacket and, hanging them on a nail he had found at the top of the door-frame, he unabashedly prepared himself; completely, openly generous with his person, helping the uneager

man with his youthfully assured writhings. But it was not satisfactory. The man only wanted to be gone. They were kissing now as the man tried to make some amends to the boy, who he thought might be angry if his motives for bringing him there had indeed been merely sensual and not for violence and gain. As they kissed, he opened his eyes and could see that the boy's were still closed: 'that's at least a good sign' he thought.

The boy put on those clothes which he'd taken off and the man moved with relief outside the shell of brick wall, able to see once more the way they had come.

With no sign of any disappointment or yet of any menace, the boy walked bouncily along beside him. «I don't know how you can wear one of these!» he said suddenly, snatching the hat off the man's head and setting it aside his own at a saucy angle, fully forward over his eyes. He strutted along with his buttocks exaggeratedly thrust out behind him: the Mickey Rooney of a later generation. 'So that's what I'm going to lose,' thought the man, thinking he'd got off lightly, although a little sad for he rather liked the hat. «It's not very sexy, is it?» he said almost apologetically, still not at his ease, still very much on the dicey side of a frontier.

«I think it is!» said the boy, still strutting ahead with his two inches of height advantage.

But the man snatched it back off his head and was not resisted.

«I haven't been doing what I done with you tonight all that long,» the boy then confided. «You could probably tell. But, hell, I'm not afraid of nothing! I was with that bloke Maurice the other night, you know the one that goes down the Vicko»—the bar whose door you ignored if you carried on up the incline and down the corridor and in through the door at the end—«the one that lisps. And he's got the hell of a big one. But I wasn't worried! He seemed to think I should be, though. So I said 'oo!' after he'd got it right up—just to please him, like!»

The headlights of a car suddenly glared ahead of them as they made their way back along the cobbled roadway. Slowly and waveringly it came towards them out of the darkness, its purpose on the deserted dock-side road not more evident than was David and Sandy's, but probably more legitimate. David hid his incongruous briefcase behind his back as the lights came nearer. But they passed and he breathed again.

«I still sees the milkman,» said Sandy. «Cor, he's a smasher! He's 22. He comes in the shop sometimes and if he does I know he's free later on. We got to do it when his wife's not there, see. She's a smasher too!» he added. «I get some most nights,» he said; «down the Vicko, you know. I have some fun, ay! I don't know if I'm going to carry on with this for always, though. I haven't made up me mind. But, if I'd done what you done to me just now with a girl, I just wouldn't be able to walk along like this, natural like, just talking. I mean, you and me's mates, and that's all right . . . They knows at work that I'm queer, though,» he said then.

«How?» asked David.

«Well, you know Louie, the barmaid down the Vicko, the fat jolly one that's always singing and laughing; well, she comes into our shop. 'I didn't know you was queer, Sandy,' she said to me one day after she

seen me down in her bar. And the shop was full of people. 'Yeah,' I said, 'as a bloody coot! I even sleeps in the bloody toilets!' And everyone laughed like hell, ay!»

«The bitch . . .!» said David.

«Naw!» said the boy, «I think she's great, really great. Honest!»

«It must be interesting working in a shop,» said the man for something to say, to make some response; «all the different people.»

«Yeah,» Sandy agreed. «Take today: I was feeling rotten this afternoon, when a woman come in and told this joke. And I had to laugh, honest, lousy though I felt.»

«What was it?» asked the man.

«It's corny as hell,» said the boy.

«Tell it to me.»

«Well, there was this little coloured boy and he thought he'd like to be a little white boy, so he got some white-wash and took all his clothes off and painted himself all over. And his mother was bloody furious and she said: 'What you got all that bloody muck all over you for? What you want to be like one of them white folks for?' And she slapped him hard. And his sister, she come along and said 'I don't want no lousy little white brother' and she kicked him up the arse and the little black boy thought: 'Jesus, I only been a little white boy for ten minutes and I hate those black bastards already!'» Although a little self-consciously, the man laughed hard. Indeed, he thought it a very good joke, with a bite to it. He said so, but he sounded false. There was also relief in his laugh for they were now passing under the railway-bridge frontier and he knew that he would retain his wallet and his watch and his brief-case and his hat and his self-respect, what still remained of it.

«Do you speak Welsh?» asked the boy. «No,» the man said.

«I do,» said the boy. «I'm the only one in the family. I got sent to a Welsh school.»

«Where?» asked the man, interested.

«Oh, I can't remember what the bloody place was called now—if I ever knew it. It was 30 miles from here!»

«What do they call you down there?» he then asked.

«Down where?»

«Down the Vicko, of course.»

«Well, 'Dave', I suppose—if any of them know my name. I told you it was that.»

«Yes, I know that. But what else—what girl's name, I mean? I'm Sandra,» he said, quite unconcernedly.

«I don't go down there that often,» said the man, lamely; thinking: 'God, if my colleagues . . .' and 'what about my precious bloody masculinity?' and 'what low-life burlesque am I going to get involved in next?'

«Come on, I seen you down there before!» said the boy.

And by now they were almost back again to the glass, street-level swinging doors.

«Well, I got to go and catch my bus,» said Sandy. «I got to get up at 4.30 every morning, but on Saturdays I gets stinking! I suppose you're going down there again,» he said, a twinkle in his eye.

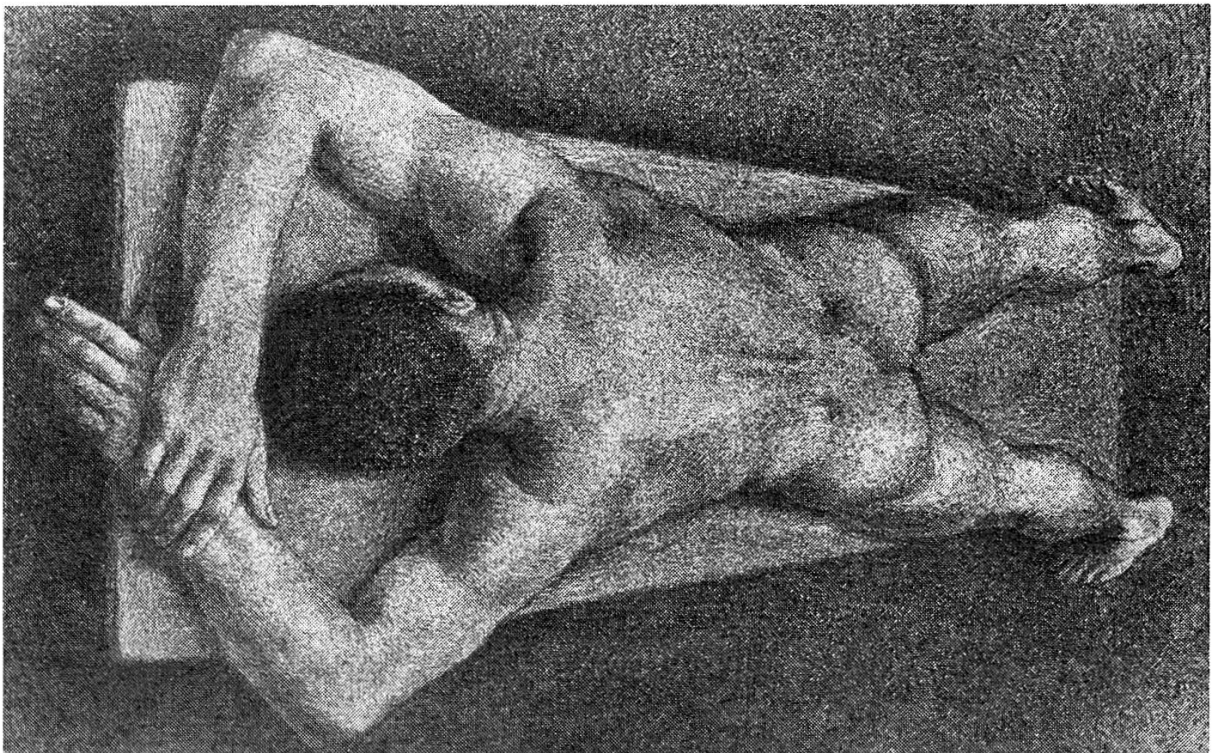
The man shrugged, non-committally. «Thank you very much,» he said —«for showing me your hide-away, and the rest; and I'm sorry my performance wasn't better.»

«Oh, that's all right,» said Sandy. «I don't mind. 'Diolch yn fawr' to you too!»

«Diolch yn fawr,» responded the man, pleased to show that he too knew that much Welsh. «See you, then!» he added.

«Yes,» said the boy. «Any time.» And he strode off into the lights shining garishly from the cinema with a permanent programme of nudes and horrors. The man looked at his watch and saw that he'd just missed another train. There was another hour to wait; after the rush-hour the service was less frequent. He turned towards the glass door which would bang after him, descended the stairs, walked past the door to Louie's bar, thinking 'I'm sorry I couldn't trust him more'; wondering if 'Any time' had really been meant, if there would be opportunity to make a better showing. He heard the creaking floor-board beneath him as he had first heard it a third of his life ago and two-thirds of the then-unseduced Sandy's and half the still-then-innocent milkman's and the milkman's hoodwinked wife. But he was not concerned with the past and all its sensitivities and agonies or with the future, when they would have stripped away the cracked mirror in the haven at the end of the corridor and taken up the creaking floor-board, obliterated for ever the ritual of clandestine steps down stairs, up incline, along corridor: a nightly dance of secret, shabby, desolate dancers. Steps can only tread where there is a way for them to tread.

by JASON OWEN



The Bench

by Jared French

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Redaktion: Postfach 547, Fraumünster, 8022 Zürich

Rédaction: Case postale 547, Fraumünster, 8022 Zurich

Postcheck: / Compte de chèques postaux: Lesezirkel «Der Kreis», Zürich 80 - 25753

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