



## From Thirty Years

I might try my hand at metalwork. I need a white metal funnel to connect the gas, or the current, to the outlet. The winters are a scourge here. There's lots of workshops, but it's crude stuff done – mostly collecting scrap and trying to sell it on. There's some guy, Maurice – Australian, American, maybe, with curly yellow hair and brogues, who tries finer work.

'We know where the gas comes from,' he says. 'From tubes, they're planted in the ground. Gas is hottest. Where does electricity come from? No one knows. It costs more and doesn't warm.'

He gives me some food – it's mostly white, a plate of rice or mashed stuff – they call it manioc, or shredded radish, potato even. 'Eat it all,' he says: he presses his knee against mine. 'The stuff that goes with it is finished. I have a local woman, she brings it, but it's finished.'

It makes you gag. Maybe he has a flame. A cylinder.

‘You need more than a tube,’ he says: ‘You need a rad. That’s crude stuff. I can do mermaid’s hair. I didn’t come away from home to do crude stuff.’

‘The anger guys have here – it’s justified,’ I say, ‘But killing guys, and doing it for cash and jobs – it’s puerile.’

‘Well,’ says the guy, Maurice, ‘you’re the one with cash. You get to hum the tune. There’s always fighting here, on and off. You could turn it into poetry – lots try,’ and we look across the road – a guy in dusty bib and brace stares back. ‘All metals,’ says the sign, but in the shed there’s only dusty poles and tubes, all grey and aimless.

‘There was a factory here,’ Maurice the craftsman says. ‘For furniture. But when they’d cut the trees, they saw they’d need to wait a generation for some more to grow.’

‘I don’t want a relation,’ I say, and he says, ‘But you like art.’

‘If it isn’t tarted up somewhat,’ I say, ‘It’s like, well, mashed potato.’

He takes me into a shed out the back: it’s full of tubes and globes. It’s burials, all ritualised – skeletons: some tubes quietly gathered on their sides, others doubled up, legs on their chins, the globes dented in. ‘You see,’ he says, ‘It could be a whole, or sold separately. Each item, or mass grave. For the garden.’

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘I get it. All white metal, all ritualised. All naked. Made to last.’

‘Look at those shepherds,’ Maurice says, ‘Up on the mound. Bones all over, each a story, aunts and sucklings. Go far back, everything has a common source. Stars – must be made of the one thing, which becomes a mass of interlinking properties.’

‘Yes,’ I say, ‘but once they separate, those things – they don’t go back. The bones stick out.’

Maurice is quite cast down. ‘All is one,’ he says, playing for time.

‘So – who’d want to bury metal skeletons on their patch of earth?’ I ask, crudely, irritated.

‘Projects. Creation – doesn’t mean too much to you?’ he asks.

‘These primitives here,’ I say, ‘they do the hunting, the planting, vendettas too. But – they couldn’t think the wheel. The push – it isn’t here. Survival’s taken up their time.’

‘You need the shining light,’ says Maurice, ‘In a movement, you’re all equal, and together – you are one. Science, religion – it gives you everything: yourself – and all the other guys.’

Should I tell him, ‘Maurice... that’s just what you haven’t got. The light. The thrust. You’re in the pit. You’d never say – “no images, and screw the books, and burn the scholars too....” You want a patron you’ll despise, but who provides meat sauce.’

Beside the dusty workshops there are dusty bars. We sit, he pours the liquor in, it first makes smoke, then alabaster, of our jars. I think, ‘You can’t get drunk on this, this white thick stuff you drank in infancy...’ I’m wrong. I stand, quite bent. ‘I’m through,’ I say. ‘Through the wall, into the clay.’

‘I can’t do conversation,’ Maurice says. ‘You owe for all this booze.’

He pulls me to a table in the back. His mates are there: ‘No, I don’t smoke, or other stuff,’ I say. ‘I’m here because I don’t believe in it. I came from there, I was in everything...’

‘This here’s Curtis,’ Maurice says: there’s a guy nondescript, the bib and brace, a doglike animal at his knee. ‘He’s anglophile. At least, his father was. That Curtis, the original, he helped the natives, I believe. “Ladies don’t move,” he said.’

‘That’s milord Curzon said it, but no doubt he helped,’ I say. ‘A slight confusion. Curtis – an actor. Bisex.’ It means I’m drunk, to comment.

‘Screw the ladies anyway,’ shouts Curtis, laughing round.

‘Is that a dog or wolf?’ I ask. I see it’s wolf, but I am doing conversation. ‘I don’t know what you see in having either, Curtis – they say they’re so intelligent, but you could find intelligent friends and walk with them, and they don’t shit and pee along the track.’

He says, aggressive,

‘The line from dog to wolf is like the line from you to me. That’s how it is. I aspire to wolves, and you, it seems, are up for intelligence. A super guy. How come you’re here, then, and quite silent?’

‘Look, guys,’ I say – they’re all metalworkers, sitting round. There’s a big pipe to smoke, and screws of dope – ‘I know my head, right through and through. I know it when it goes to paste, or cloud, or tumbling, and you read unopened books, the pictures painted from sealed tubes. I must avoid the dope, the booze...’ and I laugh, to show how close to them I feel.

‘No, no, none of that stuff,’ says Maurice. ‘Sit here. With us. And smoke. Be one of us. And so your life will go. There is no mystery. Relax. Nothing revealed. Here, it’s smoke and dust, and us.’

‘Things are slow here. If everything took off,’ I say, ‘We’d be wage slaves, or worse – handing out leaflets, taking debts, dodging machines, and thinking of suicide. They’d paint the buildings. We’re better off as is.’ Inside, I’m not so sure.

‘We can think of suicide right now,’ says Maurice. ‘At least we can handle the shepherds. They steal. Drills. Compressors.’

‘Yes,’ Curtis says. ‘You may think we’re trash, but you’re one of us, against the goddam shepherds.’ The

dope goes round. I came here to get away from it, and to watch the shepherds stealing sheep.

‘The tub!’ shouts Curtis, and here, out the back, a steaming metal can, for giants. He strips off, making like a burlesque queen. ‘The sex is optional,’ he says. ‘We’re moderns – we’re not shepherds,’ and they all take up the chant, stripping off, and running out, into the rain. They’re hopping in and out the cauldron, the grey steaming water ... leaping like ginseng roots, their lower halves – hairy as Pan’s.

I make a sprinter’s crouch, as if I’m taking off a shoe – then run. I hear the chant,

‘He’s one of us, for ever, one of us.’

Here’s a shepherd – brown sheep, brown woolly socks up to the knee.

‘You’ll not be one of them, nor one of us,’ he says. ‘Besides, your place has neither water nor a plug – I’ll sell you wood...’

‘No, no,’ I say. ‘No wood, no dead trees. I came here for the energy. It’s everywhere, just lying round. You guys, abandoned by the cart of history...’ A cart: a tumbrel. He doesn’t recognise the word.

‘You hesitate, the price goes up,’ he says, and I finish – ‘Up and up, you guys will rise...’

‘Tourists,’ he says. ‘They come, no interest in wood. They go. Then comes the cold.’

It’s poetry. I hate reactionary thoughts that creep into my head. I won’t give in about the wood, the dark wild wood. The anger guys should feel – it’s overlaid: commerce and the tub.

‘The karst,’ says the shepherd. ‘That is our soul. That’s what we are; our children stone, a vast plain of them. Sheep rootling above. We love it, it makes us eternal.’

\* \* \*

From the outside, my house – it’s a witch’s haven. Those few panes of glass – opaque, like sheets of sugar mints, the door, – splattered with spyholes. The roof – permeable as gingerbread. Inside, waiting for me, there’s this woman – a sharp smell comes off her, crushed nettles. A local sweat, no doubt. She says,

‘You should have gotten in the tub. Without that, you won’t be one of us. Or, you could buy the firewood – but you’d need to burn it in the road. Here...’ she waves around. ‘There’s nothing like an oven...’

‘That’s fine,’ I say. Maybe I rent the place from her, her folks...

‘I deal with all the postwar stuff,’ she says. ‘When it’s all over, when the battle’s moved off somewhere else – that’s when you begin to suffer. That’s my qualification – I survived.’

‘That’s fine too,’ I say. She heals, for sure. I don’t have wounds. I make to shunt her out....

‘I see you have a mind,’ she says, ‘that’s quite exquisite.’

‘Well, how’s that?’ I ask, flattered, preening...

‘It’s your material self,’ she says. ‘The face, the rest. I’d need to shut my eyes, if we got close enough to kiss, all that. So – there’s always compensation. Yours must be spirit: body it is not.’

Later I ask Maurice, ‘Who’s the healer?’ He says,

‘Nina. She stayed. She says, “Things terrible, how awful – yours, just like mine,” and hugs you. Takes some cash. She’s reason – but not science. Sometimes she sells you dope.’

‘Does she think she’s special?’ I ask, suspiciously.

‘No,’ says Maurice. ‘Just different sizes of animal, all of us. Some big apes read books, is all.’

He's wary. I didn't bathe with him. 'It's the suffering,' I say. 'After the conflict, reflecting. I could sell some story. Go into politics. Nina – goes to the root.'

'Oh no,' says Maurice. 'It's just hugs. Good and bad's a waste of time. The past is not her business.'

'I guess,' I say, 'If we were cleverer, us animals, what we do to show it makes us – well, worse.'

He doesn't follow. He fits pipe into pipe, and lives by it.

'There's not many creatures round, that we could compare,' I say. 'It's clear why it's that way, why there's only sheep and goats around.'

'The women – they're away. On the game, and such. It's better so,' he says.

'Consequences of the war. That's what I'm here to find,' I say. 'I guess you saw the tail of it, whisking away.'

'Oh no,' he says, 'I didn't fight. Though I was trained in useful things, for war.'

A mystery.

Intelligence? Resistance? Truth and justice? All useful trades in war.

A lawyer looks for the tiny rock of guilt in a sea of innocence. A lawyer looks for the tiny rock of innocence in a sea of guilt. That's their trade.

'Maurice,' I say, 'even if you came in late – you must have seen the people here....'

'Oh,' he says, 'it all just happens. You fit in. Things drop haphazard, too. Me? I stayed on – my trade....'

He flies his reticence up high, a kite, a twisting train. 'Those Arabs now,' he says. 'Just fighting everyone,' and he laughs.

'Stories – those, I'm interested in,' I say.

'Any ones at all?' he asks. 'You from an agency? You weren't clean with us.'

‘I’ve never told a lie,’ I say. ‘It’s been a drawback. I’m in everything for myself, alone.’

What can he have done, Maurice, in the wars? He says, repeating me, ‘Sometimes the tourists were English, leaving a name. Curtis is disappointed. Not the milord, it seems – some actor, American, bisex, they say.’

‘In the war, and after, Maurice?’ I insist.

‘All about names, they are,’ he says. ‘The wars. Then, after, other tourists come, bringing trade. All the countries here are like – all families, fruit on the branches: beliefs in spirits, things you never see ... the states have names – you call them out, as if you call to them. They send you off, you often don’t come back.’

‘Maybe you see the spirits at your death,’ I say, to cheer him. ‘In silver light, like the screen, brightest when the movie’s done.’

‘Oh no,’ he says. ‘I’ve seen mine. It’s a wall. Your face goes up against. Grey, it tastes like tin that’s just been scrubbed with acid.’

‘Well, Maurice,’ I say, as his grey eyes drift over me, not much involved. ‘All trades are handy, war or peace.’

‘I broke horses,’ he says. ‘Horses for the guns.’

We stand in silence. I’m eager to know everything, but not quite from him. Some perspective, but not borrowing what Curtis has – perspective quite too large. A guy who’s name is wrong, from birth...

‘It’s all so simple,’ Maurice says. ‘Simpler than you’d think. One reaches the end of the road, turns, and looks back. It’s difficult that there shouldn’t be a moment of reproach. The worst thing has been, for those who follow on, not to give the right value to another life. The other person always knows, even if that is what they want – being underprized. That means they have a secret worth. And then... it goes. The value

goes.’

‘This humane stuff,’ Maurice,’ I say. ‘It does you no credit.’

‘Well,’ he says, ‘I guess we’ve all done something wrong – so what’s the point in searching?’

The field is laid out, hummocky, a quilt, like it covers you in dreams. There’s people bent, all over, picking the stones in silence, bags round their neck. All men, dressed like they’re medieval.

Where the stones are harvested, below, it’s a grey-green, not earth nor weeds.

‘We do this,’ Maurice says. ‘Smiths and shepherds, gathering in the stones. Then, farmers will come. This is our future. Forget what obsesses you, the violence here. It’s fear and anger. That’s what monkeys feel. Then, they’re curious about the bodies that result. We’re brighter. We’re not curious, we know. That’s it.’ He shouts, ‘Go home! Even monkeys have them, homes.’

The stones are piled, worm casts. No singing, no calling out. The metalworkers make a circle, arms woven round the ring of shoulders.

Curtis is eating – can it be an aubergine? Dark, with a cheesy look inside.

It’s half a sheep skull, cleft from the nostrils – ‘The eye, and half the tongue, the brain part, what makes you climb, eat gorse, and veer to right and left,’ he says, and offers me – ‘Here’s the other half, the better one, that looks for messengers and messages, the mystery that ... we know is not,’ and he laughs. There’s a basket full of half-brains.

‘Forget it,’ Maurice says – ‘Come to the brew, we’ll make electrum. All around there’s gold and silver, dumped, abandoned, nicked. And after all, you are the golden man....’

‘Yes,’ Curtis says. ‘Test your experience. We’re bubbling up the gold and silver. Slip right in – you

never know. Electrum-plated – you’d last centuries.’

‘And what else?’ Maurice asks. ‘You want to know how we survived the war. And all those Arabs...’ and he laughs, ‘At each other, as though they’ll never stop. You guys pretend to be aghast, as if it happened on another star, as though the truth was trivial. As though you didn’t know... As though your sages hadn’t said, “the truth is precious, without it, all the rest, the freedom, the justice – it’s just rhetoric”. What do you want – to start a clinic, a barracks for the cops, a ski slope, a tarts’ hotel?’

I draw back. His breath is on me. ‘No, you’d need a partner, cash... I’m like you, I want the truth,’ I say.

‘Then you would need to fight,’ he says. ‘The best thing is the war.’

‘You made it sound like monkey stuff,’ I say.

The tub is heaving with the molten loot. There’s Nina, throwing in some drops.

‘Into the tub!’ shouts Curtis. ‘The test, the assay, fusion, alloy... Let’s all immerse ourselves,’ and he pulls everyone towards the rim. No one jumps in.

‘This electrum stuff,’ I say to Maurice, feeling they’re jostling me, urging me in once more – the metals fuse, it’s milk and honey, it bubbles up and roars like hell. I guess the guys in hell – they like to sing in unison, making a joyful sound. What else can you do? – ‘Maurice – I bet you sneak electrum in your skeletons?’

‘Oh no,’ he says. ‘Just one or two, it’s hidden, they are buried. I don’t raise the price. Of course, you can have one, in your garden, like a tuber, a truffle – your secret, and your guard. Or thousands, in a field ... as if there’d been a city there....’

He talks on, and Curtis pushes me towards the heaving crock, and shouts, ‘Maurice – have you sold one yet, a single one, a head, a heel, a clinking set – a child, a nymphlet, some old sage – brittle and rusted,

with golden teeth and bristles all of silver...?’

Maurice grasps Curtis, ‘You broken shitstick, Curtis! My stuff is made to lie unseen, buried, anonymous. It’s not for gawping, not for sale – its value is intrinsic...’ and he shouts over and over at Curtis, ‘Intrinsic!’ and changes it to ‘In! In, in, you smartass,’ and he forces Curtis to the rim. The heat burns off the clothes, and Curtis bends, quite naked, back over the crucible, his sweat flares up like kerosene, and you can hear the guys down there in hell, maybe they try some harmony, and differentiate their registers – what else can they do? Music, they say, must start and end – it’s quite anomalous in their eternity... Yet – it’s worth a try, or else time with no end is just a flash, a bore that hollows out your bones, for what’s for ever’s gone at once, a rat into its hole, a falling star from long ago that slides across to futures you will not experience....

‘Time, Maurice, time,’ Curtis whispers at his end – ‘We’re in the midst of time. It’s not eternity, it’s passing, what we have right here, what we experience, and miss, and weep for what we’ve lost. You give me suffering, Maurice, the prime human gift... Eternity – it’s wallpapers rolled up tight and sealed, designs unseen, maybe there are bluebirds, boar hunts, runes....’

‘I spare you, Curtis,’ Maurice says, relenting, pulling him into a hug. ‘Poor Curtis – neither the ladies nor the earth have moved for you, and when you ruled in India – elephants in phalanxes parading, dumped their crap before your rostrum. Milord Curtis! Viceroy who couldn’t recognise a vice, nor practise one...’ and on he rants.

Nina pushes through. Curtis says to me, ‘Nina’s not soft. She’s the one who comes into your house, and seeks your guilt. She pulls you close, traducer’s hugs. She’s vengeance. Some guy offed her man.... I tell her, “Anger, fear. You never know how much you’ve got.

Or doing what the others do – it could be anyone... Forget the deed – it has no ownership,” and while he talks, Nina makes a fist, and thrusts it in the metal brew. A pale, pale Central Asian gold, panned from the steppe – her hand consumed, she has a new, a precious armoured paw, made up of pieces now anonymous – a chalice, lid of hanap, lamps and bracelets – now all hers, fused where the flesh has been.

The pain! It helps, I hear her chant ‘... the pain – it shall be mine.’

Revenge is always pleasant – the metalworkers watch as Nina waves her golden-silver arm aloft. Then Maurice says, ‘We can’t have Nina outplay us all,’ and leaps, wavers on the rim – plunges, out comes his silvered foot, and then a hand, pale as a winter sun. He shouts through tears, ‘See! At last, I’m up to it – the journey of a thousand miles starts with a silver foot – an idiot can fight for territory, family, or because they’re told. We need the big idea instead...’ and Curtis says to him, and sneers, ‘Walking? An idea? You’re crazy,’ and he handstands on the edge – his head goes in – it’s out a smoking helmet, last silver from exhausted mines, ‘Come, you!’ he shouts to me, through cool and rigid lips, ‘Join us, show how we’re brighter than the shepherds here,’ and other guys are ladling out and falling in – the melt is cooling, but out come pairs of buttocks, nipple caps, a knee, a squidlike penis, an electrum nose....

I think, ‘I’ve failed the test again, and thankful too.’ The guys, survivors, perpetrators, victims – all of this and none ... erase the pain, and add a quintal more. The metals, gold and silver – never can belong to anyone, and so you try to fit them on you, to become them, make them becoming. Armour and fortune, a glistening parade.

‘I’ve given up on you,’ says Maurice. ‘It’s clear you

are a spy. Our project – you want to steer it, give it therapy, and take a fee. You are dross, lees, you are tailings.’

‘That must be the pyramid where past things are buried and the big guy waits to be washed clean and up into the sky,’ I say. There’s a huge mound, a scrapheap. It’s not a metaphor.

‘No,’ says Maurice. ‘To you it’s junk. It’s junk we’ll smelt into the new. Look!’ He pulls gold candlesticks, out from a maze of wire. ‘See! And these are rubies, dumped carelessly,’ he says, and makes to gulp some down.

‘I need to find a rad – one not made of platinum...’ I say, pulling at a jagged pile.

‘No,’ Maurice says, kicking at me with his precious foot. ‘Leave it! Nothing here is standard. Nothing fits. That’s why it’s here. A lesson for you,’ and he laughs.

‘I’d leave old stuff here, and try to polish up the new,’ I say, tugging at pipes. ‘Find some youth, slip my brain into her head, and leave my skeleton to her – she will install her grey slop, its invention, its adventurousness...’

‘No, no,’ says Maurice. ‘We have tried those easy ways. You must go in the tub, the crucible. Burn off the old, prepare...’

‘To do it all again?’ I ask.

‘Oh yes!’ shouts Maurice. ‘We’re a species. We can’t leave everything to giraffes.’

I’m still looking for my rads. There’s no way out – winter comes. They use explosives to turn the engines over and start them when it’s really cold. The goat’s udders go solid – it’s a massacre.

Nina stirs a sauce with her gold and silver hand. ‘This way, they’ll eat gold, like the Chinese say,’ she laughs. ‘Suicide. A fortune, if you need it and can arrange it.’

To me, she says, 'If you want to watch the tribe, you have to eat the grubs and sew buttons on your foreskin. You – you don't join the circle, join the game. It's just to make a buck, I guess, that brings you here. Compassion or shock – not for here, but back in your nestly home, you make your name.'

'Nina,' I say, 'don't be banal. You guys are plated preciously. Your accessories – they're worth more than the old world they found them in.'

'We have a project,' Nina says, pouring rare dust in her stew.

There are the metal-workers, ranged on a knoll, their silvery appurtenances shining in and out, like birch leaves lifted and abandoned by a breeze, or festive lights, on, off. No one is metallised all over, they stand, half-protected, as though one suit of armour was distributed among them all. No one will gun them down, not for disbelief, mistaken identity, fun with adrenalin. Teutonic knights, the caliph's guard – they are a sacred grove...each shoulder shore's a comrade firm... 'Hey!' Nina shouts to me. 'There's not a shepherd nor a sheep in sight! What a feast we had!'

It's true – I had in mind to make some bucks from helping these sad guys. I've dropped all that. All I need is winter heat. Nina says,

'Countries are done. Here, what a mess they've made. It's vilayets. An empire with its squeaky heart quite far away and – finite provinces, where little orders, the clan chiefs, keep the peace. Guys here – they get no cash – and so, there's nothing for them but to be a bridge. They will facilitate, and take a cut. It works that way for subalterns.'

'This Godfearing stuff?' I ask.

'Oh,' she says, 'they're sure afraid of God, and much much more, and worse.'

She stares at me. She doesn't think God sent me:

she says, 'They're all exactly like you. Soldiers, saviours – maybe their shoes are different.'

She pulls me to her, to her oily wool, a drape, a sail, knitted with staves. She makes a droning sound – maybe a song? I peer between the stitches, here must be her white skin, her legendary breasts – no: more wool ... I weep.

'There!' she says. 'You weep. The suffering of others. What'll you do when you've suffering of your own?' She keens.

'Warmth,' I mutter: 'To show the cold's not infinite.'

'You idiot,' she shouts, throwing me from her lap, 'The winters here can last two years. And if you die in them – there's your infinity!'

'What happens now?' I ask, 'Now there's no shepherds, and we ate the sheep?' The question's epic, but she says,

'My view's this – it's back to Ottomans. For us, the choice is Turks, Chinese – or Russkies... Turks is best. Kurds too, some Turks. They borrow. They deny their massacres. All sensible. The vilayet, and mercenaries. A hierarchy like capitalism – those who believe are at the top, the rest content themselves with hopes of heavens, paradise exclusive, all five star, the sex en suite....' She rambles on, a pilgrim through her politics; the Yanks are over there, Arabs dissatisfied with everything, the Africans should cut their roads so no one comes to make them toil...

'That's how the world will be,' she says. 'Now, take this pill. It takes away your memory, and when your brain is white and flat – you'll see the mystery of everything. What it's about – is time. Time's everywhere. The search we're all condemned to – is seeking something out of time. Time brings you happiness and misery. What's out of time – is peace.'

And then you'll want another pill, some more epiphany. But...' she says, as she leaves, 'You haven't paid the first one yet, and pills are bad for you, besides.'

Up on their mound, the metal workers, heating engineers, wait on. They need to cut a deal, be middlemen. And yet – they're armoured. They'll be the mercenaries. I weep – I suffer for them too.

I take the pill. Epiphany. Exactly as she said. The greatest disappointment – truth's the same all round, for everyone, like rocks.



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