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ALAN CHEUSE

## A Little Death

. . . when they draw near forty men seem to undergo a sort of spiritual change of life, with really painful depression and loss of energy. Even men whose physical health is quite good. So don't fret. . . . Often an entire change of scene helps a lot. But it's a condition which often drags over several years. Then in the end you come out with a new sort of rhythm, a new psychic rhythm, a sort of re-birth. Meanwhile it is what the mystics call a little death and you have to put up with it. . . .

—D. H. LAWRENCE to Mark Gertler, December 23, 1929

JUNE 23, 1939—I HEARD THE VOICE of the Brute on the wireless last night pouring poison into the hearts of his countrymen. It was awful, like wild beasts. . . . I much prefer the. As though it were yesterday. In front of the house on Gun Street, Spitalfields, a pavement artist turns his wrist and wields the chalk to make a rooster so real to me I can almost hear it crow. . . .

Cock-a-doodle-doo! Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Only forty-five some years ago. And now.

Bleeding—once last night—five times yesterday. And all the air in all the sanatoriums. I breathed. Coughing up clots the size of hummingbirds I saw once in France. In summer. In.

Stripping the bed and breathing in the familiar odors of oils and the haunting residue of Maria's last visit. Poor gifted dear. Running from the beasts.

Going to the desk. Glad that I saved. Reading Lawrence's letter again . . . thinking, I tried change of scene. The photograph? Marjorie and me at the beach just after we married . . . The waves lapping. Please do put on your bathing costume, please do come in with me. Reading while she splashes about. *Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure*. . . . I loved gazing at the sea. An intense blue with hot green trees silhouetted against it. The crude greens of the earth, the ultramarine of the sea, and the sunlit whites of the cliff, clear cut and solid, like coloured sculpture . . .

Ah, a mattress, like a life, as if it has absorbed all the nights entrusted to it, so heavy to haul this into the middle of the room, to begin . . . I've hauled canvas,

hauled stretchers, wood for frames. But this . . . The body is the hulk that follows the paintings around.

Oh, for the life of a labourer!

A chalk artist, working his wrist . . .

Coughing lightly. Fearing more to come. Coughing stops.

Stop coughing, Mama saying. Asking, What kind of work is that, painting, for a Jewish boy?

Faintest recollection, old Spitalfields rabbi—forgot his name—saying, What kind of a Jew makes painting? Painting is idol worship.

Painting rooms . . . would he have said that?

But instead, at an early age, the Slade.

Changed everything. Boy genius, a charity case, discovering the masters. Cézanne . . . When later that critic called me “the Yiddish Cézanne,” it stung me, made me angry, yet somehow half-pleased. . . . Angry again now. Anti-Semitic bastard! Thinking of it now, stomach heaves. Clots forming in my lungs . . .

Picture the Slade instead, the hallways redolent of oil and paint, seeing . . . for the first time . . .

Her head . . .

Carrington! Carrington!

How beautiful, the first . . .

Wasted years on her, but painting, painting. With the charity of the Jews and the help of.

Oh, and then she. With Strachey, of all. A queer, instead of a Jew.

Brings back a few days before Christmas in their rooms at the Triangle—was it '14, '15? Lawrence and Frieda and Katherine and her old Murray . . . and Koteliansky—Koh-TEE-lee-AHN-skee—saying it aloud . . .

Frieda put up some mistletoe.

Wonderful pagan rite, Lawrence said, with a sneer of a smile.

Me saying to Katherine, Come with me, come. Taking her hand, leading her into the hall and kissing her.

A little tipsy.

Where is New Zealand? I said. Is it here? I touched her breast. Where is it? Is it here? I slipped my hand beneath her shirt-waist.

Mark? She said. I could feel the heat rushing . . .

And her face, too, hot, hot!

The mistletoe, I said. Under the spell . . .

I touched her there again, and she did not flinch but did not cleave to me either.

Hauling the . . . Stopping to breathe.

When we came back into the room, Frieda saying, Gertler, look at your face!

Murray, drunk, saying, Look at mine!

Lawrence looking at Frieda, smiling at me, suddenly crowing, Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Me, in all merriment, crowing, Cock-a-doodle-Jew!

Cock-a-doodle-Jew!

All of them taking it up.

Cock-a-doodle-Jew! Cock-a-doodle-Jew!

That husband of Katherine's, oblivious to everything except his own deviousness, put something on the gramophone and we danced about, crowing all the while.

Still a bit out of breath. Sitting here a moment, the mattress at my feet . . .

Oh, oh, Gertler . . . Lawrence so out of breath he could scarcely speak. Do you know? he said. Do you know?

Do I know what, Lawrence? I asked.

Do you know—leaning way over to one side, as if this, in his inebriated state, might allow him to commune better with me in mine—Christ himself is the cock? The early Christians, they made the cock the sign for Christ. The cock crowing at dawn announcing the new day, the advent of Christ, the new Jew replacing the old, announcing a new life. Cock-a-doodle-Jew! Cock-a-doodle-Jew!

Oh, and we laughed and laughed, and the others laughed, because in that small room of his and Frieda's there was no room for confidential speech, and there was, after all, all the crowing . . . !

The Jew comes to announce, Lawrence said.

All right, then, I said. Enough of this Jew business.

You've heard enough of it?

It's funny, comical, but then.

Oh, he likes you, Katherine said. She looked at me directly for the first time since we had kissed.

And Eliot? And Forster? I heard what they said about me. Don't people know? Nothing is secret.

But that all came later, I'm . . . confusing, conflating . . . Ottoline, oh, Ottoline. She was good to. Never a mention of Jew. Just gossip about this, gossip about that. And always encouraging. Finding me buyers. But came the rise of the monster on

the other side of the Channel. We may all be blown to bits any moment, so why fear gossip? Gossip is life. They talk about the living more than the dead. Be glad. Celebrate. . . . Mother's voice . . . Painting? You want painting?

Sighing . . . Breathing easier now. And so back to work.

Work? Oh, work no more the heat of the . . . Mattress onto the window seat. I've read about. Look out there. Reminds me of, green. Early summer at Lyme Regis . . . But the awful mists, the air so heavy and liverish. Dorset, really. So much better. Hardy receiving me in the study.

Sir, I love the books. The once green time. Old man he was. A stale odour of sweat and tobacco circled about him, like a wreath. But the books, still alive.

And paintings? Oh yes, they live on, like my *Merry-Go-Round*, rolled up in the corner there. Studio closed. Because I'm not there. Wherever I. I am my own studio.

Breathing comes hard, lifting this mattress.

Coughing suddenly. Set it down. Taking some breaths.

Hefting it again, easing it upright against the window. Steady.

The trouble is—my work. What is my value as an artist? What have I in me, after all, besides the bloody clots?

Gertler, his blood period. Like Picasso, his blue. Whom I never. Though always wanted to. When we crossed to France that time, the master sent me a note: Come see me. But I thought, No, he'll merely be tossing me a crust from his table.

Unrolling the canvas. A great painting, they all said. But did I sell it?

The Merry-go-hellish-round under an orange helmet of a roof top, sixteen riders, soldiers and sailors and camp followers riding white horses as they scream . . .

Taking me back to that time. Carrington and me going around and around. And the world going around and around, the tyrants, the dictators, the soldiers, the—

A bell! Who is ringing?

Maria!

Oh, God of my ancestors, no!

I told her not.

Hurry now.

Holding the mattress in place. Maria's face. Body pressed against. Breath pushed out of me. If only it had been. If we had met earlier.

All right. Steady it. Steady. Good. Step away. It still holds. Good.

Breathing, breathing.

To the burners. Opening up the gas.

At last!

Lying here now. Thinking of dinner last month.  
Woolf said, after I had described to her the first time I tried—oh, what?—six years ago. Woolf said, Oh, how very interesting.  
The hiss of private opinion.  
I suppose she has never.  
What is it, darling? her husband said.  
Get up now, stuff towels under the doorway.  
Will it be a surprise to her?  
Listen to me. So calm. And the hiss.  
Bell again.  
Maria can't get in the downstairs door.  
So now I just wait.  
Shame about the mattress, blocking the view.  
I'd have liked to look at my last green.  
Carrington's head on the grass. In Strachey's lap. I saw her. How could she have? So devastated, she.  
Once more the bell.  
Stay calm. She can't. She'll walk away.  
And Luke? Where is little Luke?  
With his mother. Will grow up better without.  
Ay! Thoughts driving me.  
Gas seeping.  
Just a matter of.  
Must distract myself. Look at. On the shelf, here it is.

One evening of late summer, before the nineteenth century had reached one-third of its span, a young man and woman, the latter carrying a child, were approaching the large village of Weydon-Priors, in Upper Wessex, on foot. They were plainly but not ill clad, though the thick hoar of dust which had accumulated on their shoes and garments from an obviously long journey lent a disadvantageous shabbiness to their appearance just now.

Ah, yes, the first old green time.

The man was of fine figure, swarthy, and stern in aspect; and he showed in profile a facial angle so slightly inclined as to be almost perpendicular.

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Coughing a bit. Coughing, then settling down.

He wore a short jacket of brown corduroy, newer than the remainder of his suit, which was a fustian waistcoat with white horn buttons, breeches of the same, tanned leggings, and a straw hat overlaid with black glazed canvas. At his back he carried by a looped strap a rush basket, from which protruded at one end the crutch of a hayknife, a wimble for hay-bonds being also visible in the aperture. His measured, springless walk was the walk of the skilled countryman as distinct from the desultory shamble of the general labourer; while in the turn and plant of each foot there was, further, a dogged and cynical indifference personal to himself, showing its presence even in the regularly interchanging fustian folds, now in the left leg, now in the right, as he paced along.

I could draw that. . . . I could draw the labourer . . . beginning in Spitalfields, Gun Street, the pavement artist.

Bell again!

“Won’t you go away? It’s not a damned piano key!”

Sorry about shouting. Poor Maria. She gave me her gift. All the youth she left behind, running from the beasts.

Coughing, coughing. Taking deep breaths. Coughing subsides. Lovely. Picking up the book again. Heavy.

Holding it up to my closed eyes.

If I could do nothing but read. Wouldn’t it? Or paint. And paint. Nothing but that. Seascape, oceanside beach.

*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure . . .*

Jew remembering French prose, drawings in Spitalfields, the turn of the artist’s wrist, my clowns on the merry-go-round.

*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne . . .*

And if Maria. Could we make a new? But, no. These lungs of blood. Maria, run, don’t run in circles. The brute is shouting. The guns are massing. Commentators agree, in the autumn, some terrible beauty may be born again.

But here, now.

My wasted life.

My merry-go-round of hellish love.

*Longtemps, je me suis couché de . . .*

*Longtemps, je me suis couché . . .*

*Longtemps, je me suis . . .*

*Longtemps, je . . .*

*In Spitalfields, the pavement artist turns his wrist . . .*

*Longtemps . . . longtemps . . .*