

High-rise Helen

David Wheldon

There was no doubt that she is an intelligent woman, he thought, and her mind could have been so original. Perhaps, in her childhood, she had had originality; sometimes he seemed to detect a remnant of it in her appreciation of ambiguity.

They were walking along the quiet pavement by the quiet road, through the quiet night. They did not hold hands. No-one else could be seen. It was three o'clock in the morning. A hazy moon was held by a wreckage of cloud, near the horizon, ahead of them, as though moon, cloud and road were all part of the same construction. The high-rises were cast in outline against the sky, which was not quite dark. A little river-mist lay lightly in the urban valley, blurring the light of the lowest street-lamps in pale globes.

Instead, he thought, she had taken some once-prevailing system and had chained her mind to it. And now times have changed; that system is antique, and there is nothing she can do about it. She's marooned, and she doesn't even see it. He sighed. Most people are like this as age sets in: thirty; forty; fifty. It can even happen in adolescence. Often the mind closes down in adolescence. The wheel turns in the muddy rut. Spinoza had conjectured that the uncritical examination of a system brings about the risk of believing it. The mind dislikes equivocality: an appreciation of it has to be learnt. It's a rare gift.

He had a love of ambiguity of thought; where many would have been distressed, he enjoyed the movement of a mental parallax where layers of understanding shifted over one another. He found, paradoxically, clarity in ambiguity.

'Why do you sigh?' she asked, reaching for and pressing his hand.

'That's a difficult question to answer,' he said, speaking slowly. Am I to tell the truth? That she doesn't even know that her mental eye sees through a prism which someone held in front of her, and which she now holds for herself? That she's made herself a prisoner of a patterning from the past?

'Difficult?' she asked. 'Why is it difficult?'

'These questions *are* difficult. I don't know why I sighed. A state of mind. Melancholia. I see things in a dark way tonight.' Well, there had been elements of truth in that. But it is distressing to see someone of fine intelligence wearing it away. Freedom disconcerts most people. That's the conclusion he had made. Yet it is sad to see the waste of an agile mind in the fear of freedom.

'Don't be melancholy,' she said. 'Have you enjoyed the evening?' she asked.

What a question. Isn't it obvious? 'Not as much as I had hoped. It went on far too long,' he said.

'Why?' You looked so amused,' she said. 'It was only because you looked amused that I didn't suggest leaving. I'm tired now.'

'Form. You can't always be truthful. The current sweeps you along,' he said.

'What did you dislike about it?' she asked.

'All that everyone said was so predictable. It was as though it had been rehearsed.' Which, when you think about it, was the case. If you have a group of

people together who have been drawn into the same mind-set years ago, then you expect a conversation to go forward predictably; as though on rails, and you know just where the destination will be. There had been the sense of made ground being tamped, earth floors being stamped flat. 'So unoriginal,' he said. He imagined he just thought that, but in fact he had said the words aloud.

'Unoriginal? I thought some very fine points were raised,' she said, uncertainly. Her words were more enthusiastic, though, than the manner in which she had expressed them. Perhaps she was having doubts.

In fact the tone of her voice raised his hopes. He would liked to have seen the expression of her face, but they were walking side by side in the sea of darkness between two islands of light.

'I wish we had left early. We could have talked between ourselves. I feel so strange in your company. It is as though the last two years' distance has changed us,' he said. 'I would have liked to have slipped away and talked with you.'

'Look, it's late,' she said. 'You've still got a way to go. I know I said I wouldn't stay in the same house as you, ever again, but those were heated words, said without thought. I wish I hadn't said them. I apologize. I'm sorry. I should not have shouted. Do you want to stay the night, what remains of it?'

It was very good of her to offer. He didn't know why she had agreed to go out with him this evening. It had been his suggestion to meet, but hers to go to the meeting from which they were now returning. It showed that really nothing had changed. What she had heard had confirmed her own beliefs. As he had listened to the tilt of the conversation after the meeting it made him sad that people need such reinforcement. People fear incertitude, and take refuge in phatic speech. You speak, the other replies: you reverse roles: your existence and your sanity are confirmed for you both. You are on the way towards a shallow amity. Only, to his mind, it confirmed nothing. It merely told a mutuality: truth and certitude were averred, alluded to, for all the lack of any evidence. You speak merely to hear the echo of your voice. The necessity for such dialogue even tended to suggest the presence of an outer darkness. That was his conjecture, an oblique extension of Spinoza's. You could even say such phatic dialogue has a religious aspect. Perhaps at the root of it, that is religion. A common confirmation of existence, and, at the core, a seeming certainty, unevicenced, remaining merely seeming.

Eventually, with use, spurious belief is wired into the brain, becomes reflexive, is indistinguishable from instinct.

And, he thought, some people in adolescence, to escape conformity, and, acting in all innocence, leap from one conformity to a blinder, crueller one.

And then, half-purposefully, he said something that he knew she would find shocking. What he said was mild, indeed hardly controversial, but it struck at the heart of the system she had adopted. He referred to the meeting they had just attended. He said that he found unconditional pacifism to be a posturing morality. He wondered what her reaction would be. Two years ago her reaction would have been a sharp intake of breath. He didn't like testing her in this way; it wasn't the way he treated people. But nonetheless he said it. He waited for the sharp, unthinking, reflexive indrawing of breath.

In the event she hardly noticed his remark.

'Well?' she asked. 'You are very strange tonight. Two years. I don't mind you being strange: it usually means you're thinking. The wounds have only partly healed. We go to a meeting, and I think "he's amused: he's coming out of himself: that's good." Then you go all melancholy when we're alone.'

She's right, of course. 'Yes, I'll stay,' he says, 'it's thoughtful of you.' Secretly he was astonished that she had not taken offence at his remark. Could it be that a layer of some kind of mental lacquer had crazed and then cracked off?

In the night the high-rises loom vast, dissecting each horizon. Between them are the outlines of demolished terraces. Occasional lit squares within the darkened cliffs mark the rooms where people cannot sleep, where babies are being fed, where invalids are being tended to, where arguments are happening, where people have simply forgotten to turn a switch. Then there are the smaller windows of corridors, lit all night, running up the buildings like ladders. He wondered if they had a coded metaphysical significance, unguessed by the architect, but put into his mind. He'd have preferred a terraced house. Did he really wish to sleep on the settee in her flat, listening to the communal heating, or air conditioning, or water and waste running through huge pipes concealed in conduits? Encounter the slightly dry air, the faint composite smell, too mixed to give up the identities of its components? Unwanted impressions of subtle mind-contact with people unknown and unlocated? The vastness of the thing — about a quarter of a mile away, now — defeated him. It crushed him, if you want to know. She didn't mind it. "I love the views: how they change with time and season, the frost on the distant hills," she had said. She wanted it, and badgered him until he agreed with her. She tended to have her way. It was almost automatic, and before they had their final row she had started to take this for granted. In fact she would become outraged if her way was questioned.

He would have accepted this had her intelligent mind followed the nature of its own shape-shifting metaphysic: but this freedom evidently worried her. Had she been her own true self, he would have allowed her way in everything. But not when she retailed the learnt standpoint of another. He would be forced by proxy. That's why he had left.

Now he stood amongst vast shadows.

'You don't sound as if you really want to stay,' she said. 'Look, what can I do for you? You have that lost look I remember so much of old. Do you want to put your head in my lap and cry? You used to do that when first we met.'

He didn't think she would understand. He had tried to explain it to her, years ago, but she had just got bored, and gave up listening, sometimes breaking into his words. He couldn't say he blamed her. It's just that he had trains of thought that lasted for days, running through his mind, enthralling him, and when this improvisation reached its end — he could recognise the coda that is the key to understanding — he translated it into poetry. A few brief lines, representing days, weeks of thought. He could put this poem away, and, when he next read it, a sense of breakthrough came again. He felt the exhilaration of the time of writing, the walks he took, the faces in the street, the voices coming from windows, the multifarious sounds of the river, the uniqueness of the sky. A dark waste-land is lit up by a powerful mental sun and revealed to be beautiful. But, in between, there's melancholy. He had never seen anything as melancholy as these obliterated terraces and those vast, hard-edged rectangles. The most melancholy time of all, he recalled, was in the clear dawn, when the lit cells and the ladders of corridor windows were the same colour as the background sky. It's all so brutal. Brutal and strangely unreal.

'Why did you telephone me if you felt like this?' she asked. 'Have you had an argument with your present woman, and wanted to see if things had changed *vis-a-vis* ourselves?'

She had hit the nail on the head. She tends to be right about sexual matters. On the ball, in fact. Her sexual acumen's acute.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that’s about the case.’ Better to admit it. With Helen it was always better to admit it straight.

She stopped walking. She looked at him in the grey-blue light of a mercury vapour street lamp; one of those lamps whose colour makes your face a corpse’s face. It’s a poisonous light. So he looked at her corpse-face and she looked at his corpse-face. There were six of these tall lamps; they illuminated an intersection. Acting together, they obliterated the shadows on their faces, taking away dimension. He looked at her. Once she had been pretty and vital. Her opinions may have been those of others, but she expressed them with vivacity, as though they had been original to her, as though they were her own.

‘You fool. You poor fool.’ She put her arm in his. ‘You poor, sad, fool.’

‘I know,’ he said. He had to take her words. How true they were.

‘You don’t know what you’re doing, do you? When I met you it was your lostness that I liked. Lostness can be attractive in a youth, but it just looks pointless in a man. It tried my patience. You daydreamer. You don’t understand the world, do you?’

That was true. He’d never met *anyone* who understood the world. He’d met many who said they did. Some knew a fraction in close detail: others had a sketchy notion of what might or might not have been the whole. He’d met a lot of pretence. He’d met many who had no understanding of anything that wasn’t useful to them: what was useful to them they called the world. Oh, so many of them. Take tonight: the speaker certain of his own importance, his vanity pleased by the applause. He would claim he understood the world. Helen’s husband just stood mute before the world, before his wife, before his own rare gifts.

A motorway ran close, crossing this road; once there had been a railway viaduct of dark blue brick: how many arches? Thirteen, perhaps. It had been demolished long, long ago, but you could make out the curving swathe where it had run, now occupied by newer buildings. He had travelled it as a child. Helen’s high-rise was just the other side of the motorway. They were in the middle of an emptiness of tarmac carriageways with white arrows and white lettering, central steel fenders, vast suspended signs, tall lamp standards. The motorway approach roads ran onto the highway whose pavement they walked: to the sides of the approach roads were lines of garages, filling stations and food stalls. There was a small all-night cafe there. He suggested a cup of coffee. He’d been there before, on his way to see her, but he had decided against seeing her, on what grounds he could not now recall, well, he hadn’t wished to be rebuffed, he didn’t want to take the risk, and had gone in to the cafe to consolidate his thought. The coffee had been reasonable, not so much the taste as the warmth, on a cold night. Tonight was warm.

‘Yes,’ she said, simply, ‘let’s go in.’ Her tone was agreeable.

The cafe was empty except for another secretive couple in their mid thirties. They must have walked here, too: there were no cars in the car-park. The sitting woman looked like Helen; small, with mid-brown hair, sharp features, attentive eyes: not unattractive.

‘That man looks so like you,’ said Helen, softly. She looked at her husband, thinking how thin he was and how much weight he’d lost.

‘What will you have?’ said the young man in the company uniform behind the counter. He took off his hat and held the peak between the finger and thumb of his right hand. He looked wakeful, vigilant even.

‘Two coffees, please,’ the husband said, ‘with milk, but not too much.’

‘Certainly, sir. Take a seat and I’ll bring them to you,’ he said.

They sat at the window. It made him think of *Nighthawks* by Edward Hopper, except they were facing each other, rather than sitting side by side in solitary reflection. He laughed. 'Do you know that Hopper painting?' he asked.

'*Nighthawks*,' she said, immediately. She smiled. 'You always did recover quickly from these melancholy attacks.' Now they were reflecting between themselves. Her smile was nice to look at. Far better than the corpse-face under the mercury lights: or, indeed, that of the present woman who occupied his life, Selina. *Occupied* just about describes it. Helen was still young: in fact she looked younger now than two years ago.

'I've heard about this woman,' said Helen, as if divining his thoughts. 'Are you in a steady relationship?' she asked. 'If so, I hope it works out for you.'

He thought how generous she was. That's the way he would understand her words.

'It's more of a predicament than a relationship,' he said, truthfully. 'I've learnt a lot, though. I have no car. I walk everywhere. I sleep in odd places. I don't conform. I don't belong. My job has gone. Selina sees other men.' He paused. He looked astonished at his analysis of his own existence. 'I've lost. Helen, I've lost.'

She took his hand. 'Do you still write poetry?' she asked.

'Do you remember my writing poetry?' He knew she didn't regard his poetry. It bored her. She didn't like him talking about it.

'Yes. I could tell when it was going through your mind. Often for days. It occupied all your mind. I thought you were in a daydream.'

She looked at him in a familiar way. She was not unlovely. Some of her girlish vivacity had returned.

'You know that I never liked your poetry. Well, that has changed.' She paused, searching for her words. This careful use of words was new to her; he watched the uncertainty of her throat.

'I found some poems you had left in my flat, and, one evening, I read them as I sat in silence. The sunset's ever-muting tones filled the room. The silence was profound. I might have been the only person in the place. Your poems —

'It was as though I had never read them before. For the first time I began to understand them. I read them over and over. I saw the layers of thought, the tentative examination of what I would have taken for granted. It takes great strength of mind to doubt. I saw the love of ambivalence, and it amazed me. Will it help me to understand you more deeply? It well might. Did it help me discover something of myself? I think it did.'

She seemed amazed that she had said this. 'Do you still write poetry?'

'When I'm driven to, I do,' he said. He looked at her, and didn't want to stop looking at her.

So, they were talking again.

The waiter brought their coffee, in big white straight-sided mugs, together with the bill.

'I remember thinking, with astonishment, when I began to understand them, "I'm married to a poet, to someone who makes instruments of thought",' she said.

'Not a successful one,' he said.

'By the world's standards? That's no way to judge a secret art. What's the world?'

The minutes passed. They drank their coffee. It wasn't bad.

They thought: we have changed each other.

Some married couples do.

‘Freedom disconcerts some people,’ Helen said. ‘Ideas, beliefs I once cherished I now easily discard.’

She took his hand. She smiled at him. ‘They kept me under close restraint, but, in the end, when I tried, I found I could walk away from them quite easily. It doesn’t even need much courage. It just takes thought. I’m never going to that place again, where we went tonight, if I’m to tell the truth.’

Some married people change the most in what they learn after they have parted.

Bedford

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