

GUY - MARK FOSTER



THIS MAN AND ME

*Some day I shall rise and leave my friends
And seek you again through the world's far ends,
You whom I found so fair
(touch of your hands and smell of your hair!),
My only god in the days that were.*

—Rupert Brooke (1887–1915)

I HAVE BEEN IN LOVE only once. I was twenty-one years old and lived in the city I think of sometimes as my pretend birthplace, though I was not born there. That city was small and clean and architecturally pleasing to the eye. I can close my lids and picture the slender cherry blossom trees, tall and pink-colored, lining the wide avenues; the Tidal Basin, and the two great rivers calmly opposite one another—the Potomac and the Anacostia—where my father sometimes went to fish. There was, I recall, an abundance of sunny days, people smiling, and the nostalgia of quickly changing seasons. I remember nothing but happiness in that city; though to be sure there were sad times, too. But these I can't recall as clearly.

In that city, because neither this man nor myself had money, we often took long, rambling walks. Our shoulders now and again bumped one another, and the hair on my bare arms stood up and tingled. Some days we would stop at a sidewalk cafe and ask for a table in the uninhabited rear, near the toilets, and split the cost of a large, wet fruit salad. He fed me from his fork and I was promptly awed by his attentiveness, and, too, by the strange, new flutterings taking place in my body.

When he and I were together there was, when I walked, always a hardly perceptible, springy layer of cloud between the soles of my shoes and the hard, weather-

beaten pavement. At night he would lay me on his single mattress and hover in the air above me. Often I would forget to breathe. I would leave my body and from a distance watch him trace the outline of my face with the sweaty tips of his fingers. He shoved a digit up inside a still nostril and withdrew an index hung with muckilage. He bit into my flesh until my body would jerk.

Downstairs, hardly out of earshot, his aged mother sat drinking can after can of Pils beer. She wore what appeared to be the same hairnet over her greying head every time I saw her. And her toothless jaw caved in under the despairing burden of what horrified me to imagine could be a person's memories. His weight lay pressed upon me, and I thought, as in Whitman: *This is not only one man!* His tongue lathered my lashes so that I could not see but with my body; it was as if I was surrounded. I could hear the television in the background: "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In," or "Maude." It was this soundtrack of canned, vertiginous hilarity which punctuated my moans of pleasure, of gratitude, and simple lust. The fitted sheet on his bed was like his mother's hairnet, always the same one whenever I visited: a shade of dullest white with thick swirls of brown waves in the pattern. Smearred upon this threadbare fabric was the proof of our bond: there, mixed in with the undulations and food stains was his gummy semen mingled with my own, and the dark, oily excrement or fart fucked out to exhaustion from both our saliva-slickened bodies.

In the middle of the night he would awake to find me gazing at his uncircumcised penis, amazed at the now calm sheathe of flesh which had been, only hours before, violently chafing against the inflamed walls of my rectum. Sometimes, when he had to urinate, I asked if I could hold this warrior for him, pull back the shield of foreskin and guide the stream into the bowl. For some reason he always declined, amused that *it will, sometimes, simply burst out with the most aboriginal of requests.*

Months later, because of the nature of his work, he told me of his plans to relocate to this other city. I did not know yet what kind of a city it was, of its reputation as a murderer and a cheat, as an unconscionable liar. And so I asked him to take me away with him—away from the cherry blossom trees and the wide, forking rivers; and because I was young and persuasive enough in my argument and I humored him, and because he loved me, too, I think, he did this.

The apartment we moved to was directly opposite a small park. But the trees had not grown of their own accord—I could tell this; but rather they were planted with questionable intentions by what seemed to me a vain and desperate city. I could never look at those trees without feeling a slight discomfort in my chest. At the beginning these trees were pruned regularly by a man in a dull-green, belted jumper. Under the pretense of an esthetically perfected landscape, bandages were wrapped around certain limbs to direct the growth of the branches. I thought, indignantly: *This would never have happened to the venerable cherry blossoms in my city.* In every way these trees were being prevented from flowering into the full extensions of their true selves. This horrified me, and yet I averted my eyes and behaved as if such oppression could not concern me.

It was at this point that I began to hold my love more and more loosely in my grip. Other men caught my attention. I would stare after them, smile, and once again I would snatch my eyes away in embarrassment. I did not understand this behavior and when I was alone with the man I lived with I would lavish more and more attention upon him, to make up for having strayed earlier with my mind. But whichever direction I faced there stood before me always this implacable guilt. I turned and I turned and I turned my head until a kind of terror shook me. "I'm lost," I thought.

Avoiding those trees, I began to leave the apartment when he was away and I would walk along dark streets looking strange men in the eye. If ever anyone displayed the slightest curiosity I would panic and accelerate to a brisk pace. I only wanted these men, for an instant, to witness my impossible interest in them. I played my eyes over their bodies until I sensed their arousal, and then, like a shot, I would bolt. I never wanted them to respond: for then I would be committed to them instead of to the man I had come to this city devoted to, and I could not risk such a betrayal.

During those days we seldom had friends over. But when they came this man I lived with would become suddenly more vivacious and brighter than he was when with me alone. I did not take offense to this. I enjoyed the many variant angles to his persona. With him I was always surprised and always, simultaneously, on the surest footing. In honor of the arrival of these people in our apartment he would drape colorful African cloth over his chest and sit cross-legged on our murex purple carpet and tell funny stories, gesticulating with his blunt, flat-tipped, expressive hands. White candles in tall cylindrical jars would be lit throughout the room and soft music would play on the turntable: Peabo Bryson or Brenda Russell, singers he liked. He was in the theater and so were many of these friends. I was outside all that. I had been inside but, in the end, he and these people I thought were more committed, not to mention adept, at this type of work than I ever hoped to be; and, anyhow, I felt the need to uncrowd them all by stepping down and out of, what seemed to me, their already too immense and over-populated circle.

After a while I began to unbuckle my trousers on some of those walks I made at night and stroke my penis to erection. Sometimes, if it was cool, I carried a jacket to drape over me in case of an unsympathetic passerby, or a woman. I lived in an exalted fear of being seen by one of our many friends, and of them reporting back to my lover my nocturnal habits. In my worst hours I craved for this. In time I grew very brave, and often some man would stop to chat with me. He and I would stare at one another, each waiting for the other to grab him where he was most elongated; and both of us, too, incorrigibly lusty, full of a secret, exhilarating, nasty, dual fright.

The city was at its ugliest then; it was even common to see grown men taking a piss in full view out on the sidewalk. Besides, the buildings were all covered with soot and in various states of disrepair. Access to the sky was severely restricted by the ludicrous height of these block-shaped edifices. Each morning a new rash of

killings covered the headlines. When I returned to our apartment, if he had come in I would tell the truth: that I had been out taking a walk. Or else, shamelessly, I would lie. During the night I somehow would lose sight of these wanderings and by the morning the memory was all but obliterated. At rest all those hours, next to his dark, regenerative body, somehow this absolved my soul: for he never judged me, or otherwise gave indication that I was not to be trusted. I felt it was therefore incumbent on me not to disappoint him. As in the beginning, by sunrise it was as if I had died and been reborn all in the long, purifying interval of night giving way to the diurnal. I became my old innocent, sweet-natured self: a bit irascible but harmless. I rolled over to him and we made love, or we simply kissed one another upon our fat, ancestral lips, and the trial began all over.

One evening I met a friend of his, a certain actor from the south who was not very attractive. He was tall and absurd with his body—the perfect hick. He spoke with the customary twang in his voice, and always leaned forward to clutch a person on the shoulder when talking. I remembered he had one of those highfalutin society names, as from a Henry James novel: Charles or Frederick.

It began simply enough. I loathed him. He had no sense of moderation and saturated himself in musk-scented oils. He reeked of it. Instead of making him more desirable, this repelled me. And it did. But then I felt badly for him. He so wanted to be a part of the 'in' crowd, stylish and in the 'know,' like the man I lived with, and all the others in his profession—those who paraded themselves in bright plumage and behaved as if a camera were recording their every gesture. He reminded me of myself: the outsider who longs desperately to be inside but who simply does not fit; who isn't popular or even talented, or especially well-liked, but who is merely tolerated as the embarrassing love-object of one in their ranks; who has simply lucked in on a certain crowd, as I assumed I had with this man and his friends. But after a while I could not stay away from him, nor he me. We phoned each other and confessed in quick, movie-script voices:

"Don't you want me?"

"He'll find out."

"But you want me, right?"

"No."

"Liar."

At his apartment we circled each other. He had already bathed himself in his favorite scent and it was all I could do to keep from retching. To my horror, he wore a short-sleeved, plaid shirt a size too small, and loose-fitting generic blue-jeans with loopy stitching on the back pockets.

"No," I thought, when he held me. He did not remind me of myself, but rather of boys I had gone to school with, boys I had admired yet had not been friendly with since they had claimed a much stronger kinship with girls; or, as he told me, in his case, with large-hipped women. Nevertheless, that first time he exuded caution for only an instant. Soon he had bruised my neck with his uneven teeth and I had torn a button off his shirt. In no time both our jeans lay undone at our ankles and we ground or bodies together, liberally, as if to reach the core of some-

thing we both believed lay concealed in the deepest recess of the other. He did not have as finely muscled a body as the man I lived with. His was of a larger mass, but it was soft and there was a surprising opacity to his copper complexion; it did not give, but took. In our lovemaking there was no confidence: it was all crying out and mad panic, as though we were sure the world would end because of our illicit groping. And yet I knew it was too late to turn back.

Some nights I lay next to the man I lived with and did not know him. I was twenty-three or twenty-four years old and had grown very skittish. I began to hide my various new faces from everyone who entered our lives. When friends visited I discouraged them from staying long by storming out of the room, or by showing them the door when I decided enough time had lapsed. Leaving, they merely smiled at one another or said, "Oh, Mark's just being Mark. Isn't he cute?" I had lost my identity and I resented these people for telling me who I was, and when they'd gone I would become an emotional gymnast before that man; it was as though I'd gone mad. He was calm and loving, and sometimes he would say my name aloud to cool me off, or sit astride my body and ride my erect penis to exhaustion; other times he would take up his sketch pad and draw mythical figures of tall dark men with scales along their backs and a bit of schizophrenia in the eyes.

We never returned to that other city, the one we had left. He often went alone to visit his aged, alcoholic mother and I would wait for him after my nights of walking the streets. I had adapted too well to this new city. I misplaced all memory of the parades my mother had taken my brothers and I to see every year along Constitution Avenue, for the cherry blossoms. I forgot the picnics on the grounds of the Smithsonian. When I was with some other man, and not the one I lived with, I would be caught off-guard sometimes by a recollection. A vivid sadness would wash over me and I would drift back in time to when he and I would ride the Metro from the housing project where he lived with his mother into the center of that historic city. He would sit next to me and just as the doors closed he would shut his eyes. I sat in silence beside him, awed by his trick of blotting out the world through meditation, as I had been awed once by his fork between my lips. This mastery of myself was what I wanted, but I could not be confident that I would come back from such depths; therefore, I leaned upon the proven solidity of his frame for support and guidance instead of searching for it from within. I thought: *I dare not risk such a journey for fear of losing myself inside my vast, chaotic self.*

When I was twenty-five or twenty-six he came home from being weeks away and confessed his love for some other man over me. This was in the summer, and while he had been away I had undergone yet another rebirth and was more determined than ever to hold my love more firmly in my grasp. I had not seen that musk oil-wearing actor for some while, nor any other man. I had been cleansed this time not by his presence but by his very absence. It left a hole in me the size of that city which had initially nurtured our love, and I had stared bravely into it while he was gone. The depth of it stunned me; I did not want to ever be without him. I could not, I thought, survive it.

We tried to wait it out. When he left in the evenings to rendezvous with this other man I would fire up sticks of incense to burn the stench of jealousy away. I played his favorite records over and over like a mantra, especially “If Only For One Night”—a song he had serenaded me with in our courtship. I would extinguish all the lamps and, with a single white candle, sit in that heavy darkness and try to glean from Brenda Russell’s mellifluous voice and, too, from the guilt I felt, what could be salvaged from my shattered world.

Eventually, it was no good. One night this occurred to me and I lay up in our loft bed, sobbing. The windows were opened and all our neighbors could hear the despair flying out of my body like birds being freed from an aviary. We had often lay there ourselves listening to the desperate fucking, and the curses in English, but in Spanish too, which was the language of that part of the city. For seven hours the deluge was unceasing. The man I loved lay listening in the next room. I did not know to what extent he was aware of my infidelities, but I was sure that this was the very reason that had pushed him, finally, to form this sudden alliance. The planet had abruptly come spinning off its axis and was now shockingly out of control: I had not truly imagined that this could happen, no matter how often or rarely I strayed. If anyone, I thought, reminded me of those adolescent boys from my youth—in whose arms I imagined lay my eventual salvation—it had been him all along; and yet for years I had felt that I was suffocating with him, and that simultaneously I was living the greatest pleasure a man could fabricate out of the stuff of his dreams.

Later that summer I moved out of the second floor walk-up he and I had shared in that city, into a one-bedroom affair across the bridge. I did this decisively, and yet in spite of my packed boxes I could not quite believe in my actions, or in the actions of those friends who assisted me with my belongings. It was not my body, I told myself, that this was happening to, but some other poor man’s worn-out, adulterous body. I was very much like those trees across from our building, I thought, who had suffered, in years past, a similar asphyxiation of spirit. Like them, I felt paralyzed at having my expansive potential for love smothered so early in life, without having a say in the matter. I shut my eyes to what seemed a ruling beyond my self-government and, instead, I fashioned an alternate reality to compete with the obviously untenable one that faced me. For months afterwards, and then for years, I convinced myself that as far as those trees were concerned, the filthy pieces of sackcloth would eventually rot and drop from around their bark-covered bodies, and with a vengeance an unprecedented blooming would occur. In my patience I willed for a similar reconstitution of justice to happen for this man and me. I clung with fingers and nails to the hope that if I were patient and good—something I had not been before, but had wanted to be and failed—then he would forgive my indiscretions and, because he had once loved me, come back to me.

After all, he was my god.