

A DESCRIPTION, FIRST

A fact, first, of the city: thin roads lead to large buildings. Conclusively and without exception. I pawed the ground outside the jail. I ran my hands through my hair. It was my birthday.

Though the buildings that seduce these roads, that enclose enough unitary space for a road to form, are rarely large in the city. They have remained understated for many years. My face without solid surfaces undulated in the glass of the jail. I hoped the inmates would not be able to see me; they would, without anything else to do, surely plan to kill me, standing there, blowing smoke without company.

I crossed to the newsagent and picked up a paper.

Burmond Callwell worked himself into a frenzy on the morning of his transpacific flight because he had two full-sized salt-and-pepper shaker statues on his hands and he had been told to have them moved from Tokyo, Japan to a residence near Goswell Road, London. At the present moment they were in the dormant position, standing side by side, waiting patiently for him to come outside onto the landing and lock the door. To carry them down into the approaching minibus, they would have to be shifted into the excitatory position, hugging each other in diagonal, the folds of their bodies perfectly complementary to one another, and then perhaps carried down by three or four extremely strong people. Callwell worked in the finance industry, though not in terms of money. He made adverts for local finance institutions. One is usually unsure of what else to call these businesses.

So Callwell had little experience with heavy lifting and had called some friends of friends, two large Japanese fellows with keys on their belts, here they were now, and they without small conversation transferred the bothersome cargo into the back of the minibus. Of course, they required a lot of space and a lot of suspension of disbelief – the statues, not the Japanese men, Callwell was in Japan after all, and the subject of much attention himself, with his unreasonably blond hair and ensuing baldness. They stood by it all the way to the airport. When it was time to go they moved it with the grace of a Buddhist master and then scrabbled back into the bus like rats, and bayed like dogs for the driver to gun the engines and begone.

Some time soon after Burmond Callwell explaining to the flight attendant the various aspects of his necessary companions, such as their dreadfully fragile ceramic bases (moulded as the cloth habit of a priest, for instance – somehow they were religiously-acquainted salt and pepper shakers), there conceived another palaver at the south pole of the Aeronca, involving three members of a travelling circus: an androgynous man, a man, and a young girl whose talents were of the inobservable kind. Between them they made up the headline acts of a German circus on tour. A description of the man who looked like one is perhaps superfluous to this story. But alas,

I thought, what an obtrusive story. I scanned a moment. My name was written at the bottom, next to junior correspondent, and a page number. Page one. Thank god, I was big enough to make it to the very first page. I wondered where Mr. Callwell was at the moment, if he knew where I was. I knew for certain that he had succeeded in his mission but I had left the final detail out of the piece, so as to create mystery. At the same time that the door of the jailhouse was removed I hated the presumptuousness of my work.

‘This isn’t a break-out, Dana. No, it’s actually something of far more significance. See,’ and the man pointed out the frame of the door. ‘Watch it. It’s gone, going. There are substances all around it. So at some point the door will fall straight off and all of the people inside will be able to come out.’ I was barely close enough to hear him. ‘Come over here, I want you to see this.’

He was installing a metal door as opposed to a wooden one: the metal one was already propped up and it stood without supervision a few yards to the side of us, perfectly straight, unbothered by the southern wind, at an angle to eavesdrop. What’s your name, I asked. It had a glance at the man before telling me a name that’s since escaped memory. I nodded and turned back, incapable, bored.

A fact, then, about the thin road that took myself and Ms. Sedgwick away from jail. It was bumped in places and smooth in others, as a tongue is. Our roadster was big, round, and a little tall, and as I drove I felt that this long yellow tongue was being withdrawn back into the mouth of a gigantic green toad. I felt too that my

companion was, with every passing metre, straining to keep her grip on the world. She had short-cut blonde hair and a pretty set of earrings. Other than that there was abysmality written all over her. It stunk and I made a note to drive the car into the river mouth and leave it there. I lent her my hand and squeezed hers, to which she cocked upright and began to shout at the passersby. We had come to a severely populated stretch of the road. There were more traveling circuses than expected, of the American kind, some foreign caravans, and a litter of children running around. The way she watched them pass procured for me an unfamiliar thought which I will return to at some point.

If I have anything more to say about the road or indeed the journey itself it is exclusive to my tumult of passions and discrepancies with Sedgwick and nothing to do with the value of my time in the hinterlands. Except, and perhaps I have postponed this detail for too long, that on crossing the mountain ridge into foreign territory she began to cry noiselessly and without much movement, such that I drove on for a good while into the dense forest without taking notice. When I turned at the point of sunlight her face had sheened over. Both arms remained by her sides, both legs stiffened. The eyes were working at such a pace that I felt the rhythm of the roadster engine begin to disintegrate, unable to corroborate. For a moment and then another she appeared just as my own wife often had, as unliably disintegrated, beyond sustenance, participating in a game of brinkmanship between herself and herself, and it was my necessary duty to sit and drive like I had been taught as a young man, and to watch the road, watch the damn road. When we arrived at my accomodation she went stealthily from patio to bathroom and a great whining arose – as I entered, the last of her hair had reached the floor and she scooped that unbelievable face upwards and met my gaze and I saw the sort of fury I had seen in the walls of that purple mausoleum room, and of course she was now bald, the baldest even. My right hand went straight for my own scalp and smoothed the remaining hair into order.

‘I’m going to work now. I’m a writer, that’s my work.’ I tried to smile with as much love as I had. I was going to write something down, it was a truth. I had to put all of these pieces together and put them somewhere for them to stay and not get lost. I would find the manuscript about Burmond Callwell and burn it as well, and then start afresh. A description, first, of the relationship offered unsolicited to myself and the Sedgwick girl. No. I put the pen down. I could hear her sleeping upstairs. There was an animal somewhere between the walls, something fat, self-indulgent. Perhaps it was the peculiar orange rodent that my boy had kept for six months and then become tired of, and perhaps it could smell his blood within me and wanted to come and sit on my lap and talk things out. The landline started bleating.

‘Hello, how’s your mother? And your brother? Good. And how is your mother’s father? He’s good too? That’s good. No, I’m at home. Home before home. Where you were born, boy. Who’s that? Oh.’ The bald head had elapsed past my shoulder. ‘It’s my friend from a long time ago coming to keep me company. What? No they have hair they have hair.’