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*Wrong Norma* (2024)

AN EVENING WITH JOSEPH CONRAD

*Once somehow, once somehow I lost both of them*, a man was saying as he came out of the elevator that morning. He was alone. He flicked his eyes on me, off me. He had a furtive tinge and a swank black overcoat - I thought at once of Joseph Conrad, as he is in formal photographs, with the not-quite-Western eyes and virtuosic goatee.

Once I was invited to a christening in a country far away. It was June. On the drive the weather closed in, grey and vague, typical summer weather for that region. The ceremony was in a tiny white church. Everyone sat packed like teeth. Short glorious off-key songs were sung by a ten-year-old girl. The sun came out. Everyone rushed from the church to stand amid graves, talking, amazed. Vast general fields reached away on every side to the mountains, a greenness so dazzling it hurt the eyes. Soon all embarked in cars and drove to a nearby farmhouse for lunch. Sunlight was spilling over everything. The farmhouse stood with all doors open, children tumbling in and out, busy conversation everywhere. I knew scarcely anyone, so stood in an inner room, near a table draped in a lace cloth and heavy with cakes. If I were Joseph Conrad, I could not help thinking, I would be mastering this room in case I might one day write about it. There stood a cake as big as two schoolbooks emblazoned with the name of the new baby; a cake in chocolate shaped like a bear full of candies that erupted for children; several tall blocklike structures layered with red jam alongside fluffy cream cakes and other smaller foods, shrimps on crackers and so forth. Finally, carried in late with a sort of hasty deference, on its own blue-patterned china plate, a stack of sliced white bread. The plate was placed, as it happened, in a shaft of sunlight and the white bread shone, as white as a freshly laundered cuff, as white as its own piety, on the lace cloth in that shadowy room. There was something ultimate, adorable, almost sexual, something certainly historical, in that stack of bread set into the

larger history of a sunlit afternoon on that ancient property amid fields stretching to the ends of the mind. No one ate the white bread. It wasn't there to be eaten. It was a chapter of civilization. Joseph Conrad, who had lived that chapter, now groping in his pocket for the small notebook in which he liked to record thoughts, would find he'd left it back at the hotel.

Once Conrad shot himself in the chest. Not much is known about that.

Once a student of mine, translating Euripides on a mid-term exam, came up with "wild in the grips of a god." Those were the days.

Once Thomas Hardy was strolling on the heath with a telescope. He put the telescope to his eye. He saw a man in white on the gallows at Dorchester and at that moment the man dropped down and the town clock struck eight. "Faintly," says his autobiography. A faint note from the town clock. A man has lost things.

Once I wondered if white is a colour.

Once you touched Thomas Hardy he recoiled, so a childhood playmate records. This peculiarity never left him. I doubt he offered to shake hands with Joseph Conrad when introduced to him in the drawing room of Charles Hagberg Wright on a January night of 1907. It was a dinner for the Gorkys, who were late.

Once I was waiting for the elevator in my building and Joseph Conrad came walking out.

Once I began wondering about history, I couldn't escape the feeling that we only call it history when things go wrong.

Once a reporter wrote of "the miracle of white bread" in a valuta store in Moscow - this glowing heap of crisp little loaves twice as radiant as the rubies and diamonds of the jewellery department at the other end of the shop (Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia*, 1937).

Once I spent a season impersonating Joseph Conrad. Dressed in a large overcoat I would emerge from the elevator, hoping to catch myself waiting for me. He was hot in my coat.

Once Goethe called colour "a degree of darkness."

Once I encountered the term “counterespionage,” I became confused about what “espionage” was. How many sides can a piece of paper have? Why put a mirror *behind* your head (Freud did)? When I wish to report that I, as Joseph Conrad, never pick up the check in a restaurant, whose dossier do I put it in?

Once Charles Hagberg Wright realized the Gorkys were going to be not just late but very late, did he try to get a conversational crackle going between Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad? History is blank.

Once I was sitting and wondering about the mirror behind Freud’s head when a letter dropped through the mail slot, inviting me to a christening in a country far away. Aha! I thought: I would send Joseph Conrad.

Once I relaxed about counterespionage I began to enjoy gazing down through layers of Joseph Conrad going about his faint, preconscious tasks. Several ladies at the christening found his faintness attractive. Standing by the cake table chatting about the blue of the sea, the tumbling of the sea, redemption by sea, he did not let on, nor did I, how gloomy it made him to be the guy to go to for *all this sea stuff*, whereas Thomas Hardy published novel after novel on any topic he liked and they sold and kept selling.

Once the analysis is over, said Freud to H.D., the person is dead. And H.D. said, Which person?

Once Patroklos fell, did the horses of Akhilles see colour for the first time?

Once I was doing badly and read Lacan for help. *Ce que je cherche dans la parole, c'est la réponse de l'autre*, I read. *Ce qui me constitue comme sujet, c'est ma question*. I felt better already. Next came a bit of French I couldn’t construe. I flipped to the endnotes and found:

*ab1y 1b view ad w11t w111 ie. lb*

*ar1er ta d1b1 11d*

Once the party had ended and I was clearing plates with the hostess, I asked her about the white bread, its signifying supremacy, its itinerary as a fetish, I may even have quoted Lacan. She laughed. No, it was just a mistake. Her sister had misheard her on the phone, she’d been exasperated at first but then it didn’t matter, there were too many cakes anyway.