

Marcel in Manchester

For a long time I used to visit Manchester weekly. Sometimes when standing in front of John Lewis' window I would say to myself *I'm going to go into that shop and make a purchase*. The thought would arouse me, as if from a waking slumber, while the image of what I was going to buy was still before my eyes, like a separate vision illuminated by the afterglow of that thought, and at the same time I would be astonished to find myself in a state of such gloom that to my mind it appeared incomprehensible, shallow, a wasted sliver of time.

I would ask myself what time it could be; I could hear the babble of crowds, which, pressing close, punctuating the separation like a flock of birds in a field, showed me a new perspective, often wished for: an empty city, in early morning, where a shopper would be scurrying towards the nearest mall, perhaps the Arndale, the path which he followed being fixed in his memory by excitement, due to words previously exchanged by mobile phone, due to the street light which flickered and cast familiar shadows in the fading night, and to the delightful prospect of finding oneself in the men's underwear department.

I would press my nose against the glass, smell the odour of the day's business, or I would peer within, nearly time to enter, the hour when the shopper has started his journey to this familiar place, and seeing an assistant, is shown to the escalators. Oh joy! The thought of trying a pair of Calvin Kleins, or perhaps Hugo Boss in a velvet lined cubical; those thoughts come nearer and then die away. The thought is extinguished; a stranger passes by, the reflection is in the glass and I must wait in the agony of indecision where I would fall into reverie and often wake again in brief snatches, only to hear the irregular footfalls of pedestrians, or my eyes would settle on the shifting crowd, there to taste in an instantaneous flash of insight the mindlessness which lays upon the street, the façade, the whole surroundings, of which I was but a small part and whose state I should soon share, or perhaps in my reverie I had returned to an earlier stage in my life, now forever history, when I had come under the thrall of friends such as when we raced from floor to floor in the haberdashery on the Paris rue de Leon, Montclair. I had forgotten that event in the interim and remembered again the moment I woke up.

Sometimes too, while I was daydreaming, an image would form of a youth posturing and simpering, conceived out of the appetite that I was on the verge of gratifying, my body aware that his proximity would cause me to wake. If, as was often the case, it was some man that I had known, I would give myself to the proposition that the pursuit of him, like a traveller who must find some lost marvellous city, known only in antiquity and to the acquaintance of long dead scholars, was my sole quest and begin to imagine the taste of him until it would dissolve and vanish like a forgotten dream.

When a man idles outside *Greek Coffee* or *Café Turk* he is lost in the circle of diminishing hours so that instinctively when he wakes he looks at his watch to know the abandoned time. But suppose that he does not do so out of some will,

or perhaps he has forgotten to bring his watch, then at the moment of waking he will have no concept of time and the world will seem strange and new, because he could be in any city in the world at any time; losing all sense of place I would cease to know who I was, until from the most rudimentary depths of the unconscious I began to build out of the void, with less cultivation than an infant, from the dark abyss of none-being, from which I could not escape without memory, begin to surmount the ages of learning and put together the fragments of my remembered self. Perhaps the permanence of the city is the product of our conception of it, for it always happens that when I became aware, my mind would struggle in the attempt to locate where I was, the objects, places, years shifting like reflections in the window so as to induce a tiredness from which I must seek resolution or rest.

These changing and confused memories never lingered for more than a few moments, as often happened in my spell of uncertainty as to where I was, much like the successive frames of a movie film, but I had seen one and then another of the times in my life where I had been here before, where, on standing near the portal of John Lewis I would check my coat and contrive to order the keys, wallet, gloves, all of which I would position with the patience of those doing religious penance, constantly shifting as gusts of air ran up the street.

Certainly I had now made all the memories cease their dance, and through the windows I could see a rack of winter coats, scarves, pants and jackets. But it was no good knowing that I was not standing before John Lewis Manchester in those other times; if I had not caught sight exactly I could still believe in the possibility of their presence, for recall was now set in train: jauntily stepping towards the moving stairs, advancing by leaps towards the underwear section. Just at the top, next to the perfumery and along the grey tiling, dividing the fat belly of the floor until just before the first stand of cotton y-fronts, Gerry stood, lost in contemplation, wearing a blue waistcoat. The body of Gerry himself could overcome all material obstacles. Everything seemed to be in his way, the vest stand, the thermal underwear display, but he seemed to float over and through them, adapting himself at once, never losing his dignity or his melancholy, never showing any sign of trouble at such transubstantiation.

And indeed I found pleasure in those bright recollections, but I cannot express the discomfort I experienced at such intrusion of mystery and beauty into a place which I visit only rarely now. The anaesthetic effect of habit being destroyed, I would begin to think of miserable things, acquainted as I was with all the crimes and misfortunes of Gerry which had led me to a scrupulous investigation of my conscience.

But after examining several elasticated examples I soon felt obliged to stroll to the counter as there were several sporting straps which took the cast of my eye.

"My name is Marcel and I have come to examine your jockey shorts." I said.

"Oh, have you now?"

"Yes. I am a Frenchman and I have particular needs."

He shrugged his shoulders and took my interest in his wares with resigned embarrassment, as he fingered the lines of surgical apparel beneath his hands, flanked by neat rows of branded trusses, he felt that in his arrangement he had

betrayed a liking for the straight and symmetrical, an absence of feeling for the organic, regulated by the rectangular counter which had deadened his soul and so there was no little anxiety.

When I ambled forward, moth-like before the overhead light, he perhaps suspected that I had come to tease him, that he looked so gentle and so sweet beside this Parisian sophisticate, that I should cause him to subordinate within himself all of his troubles, troubles appearing on his face blended in a smile which, unlike those seen on the majority of assistants, had no trace of irony, while for me, kisses seemed to spring from his eyes, which could not look upon those who were earnest in the appreciation of all that he had to offer, without yearning to bestow upon them passionate caresses, or so I hoped.

And yet as soon as I heard his reedy voice, in my cowardice I shrank back and in my mind ran to my room to cry. I could detect the telltale aroma of polyester issuing from so many of the stretchy pants, the hint of elastane, doubtless because my sensibility required refuge in the mind and the distraction of the senses, while I weakly looked to the heavens, his handsome face with its aquiline nose seeming to respond with the slightest trace of an involuntary tear.

My sole consolation when I went to the cubicle was that Gerry came and handed me *the trolleys* as he, in his English way, so curiously called them. But this moment lasted for so short a time, he withdrew so soon, that the moment I heard him key in a sale, and then caught the sound of another customer enquiring with that rough guttural accent so characteristic of those who inhabit northern climes, that there was for me a moment of keenest sorrow. So much did I love that afternoon that I reached the stage of believing that I might return again and again until I had exhausted their stock, finding myself replete in the matter of gentleman's undergarments.

Without the most insignificant details of our life, none of us can be said to be whole, which is the same for all, our personality is created for us by the thoughts of other people, to some extent an intellectual process which we describe as a simple act of seeing someone as they are, but what we see are all the ideas we have formed about them, so that when we do see someone it is our own ideas which we recognise.

I longed to call him back, to say to him "Kiss me just once..." but I knew that he would be annoyed that in my wretchedness and agitation I belittle his selling skills. And to see a look of displeasure would destroy all the sense of tranquillity he brought me the moment before, when he bent his loving face over me and asked: "Would you like to try them on sir?" But the customers were limited, apart from some passing trade, sometimes an embarrassed husband with a wife, but more frequently an older gentleman, unattached. And so there I stayed, hanging on words which fell from his lips. Although a far younger man, Gerry was to become an intimate friend, an excellent but eccentric companion. For many years Gerry came to see me in my bungalow in Warrington and his parents never suspected that he had entirely ceased to inhabit the existence with which they were familiar; but I digress, as I stand before the portal, ready to enter John Lewis once again, with utter reserve and total discretion, ready to play with the simplicity of a child.