

We Are The Poet

'Verses For The Melancholy Soul' was a phenomenon now, according to the newspapers. I had bought all of the nationals over a four week period and the pile was too big for the hall. I went through them, cutting out the articles about us. It took an entire day to put the reviews into cellophane wallets and then into a ring-binder in order of negativity.

Julia and Ken came around the next day and we had lunch, an exotic take-out. Now that we had money I was fascinated by how it could be used. This was Oriental food, but a kind I had never ordered before. It didn't taste better exactly, but I felt better eating it. So did they, I was sure, though we were pretending that we were adapting to every aspect of this experience- we avoided the word 'success'- with no difficulty at all.

"I've collected the articles and put them into this folder," I said. This was after the dessert of small but intensely-flavoured squares of chocolate, topped with sour cream and a herb which I secretly thought to be too savoury.

"Oh, let's have a quick look," said Julia. They read each one word for word and it was forty-five minutes before anyone said anything. I made coffee with the new grinder and espresso machine and served it in tiny plain white cups.

"I like the one that says it sounds as though it's computer-generated," said Ken. "That could be our next gamble."

We laughed. Satisfied, coffee-warmed laughter. It was so comforting to be in the middle of such a reaction, such attention and money. 'Verses For The Melancholy Soul' was the highest-selling volume of poetry ever. To those in the publishing business it was largely a 'good thing', but to the critics who eked out a living not much better than that of the average poet it was a disaster. The quality of the poetry was not deemed terrible, but none of them could mark it any higher than mediocre, not even those from the popular newspapers whose readers were sweeping the volumes from the supermarket shelves into their trolleys. The fact that it was anonymous made it worse. 'Why?' they asked. What was it meant to prove? Was it a joke, a supposedly telling comment, a front for an already well-known writer trying to slip something in under the net? Did he hope that the reviewers were going to rave about the poetry so that then he could reveal himself and they would have to withdraw all previous criticisms?

It was none of these. Julia, Ken and I, who had all written a great deal but never broken into any magazine except for those which were only read by the people published in them, had written the poems and submitted them via an agent with instructions that the writer must be anonymous. It wasn't an original idea, but it had been a while since it had been used, so many of the papers were willing to take up the story when the agent and the publishers pushed it their way.

We spent the afternoon drinking and grazing expensive snacks from my fridge. We listened to a piece about ourselves on the radio, the usual affair where the presenter read out the astonishing statistics- more volumes sold that week than the rest of the top twenty put together- and re-told the story of the publishing coup of the decade. Then two guests came on, one bitterly decrying the degraded taste of a group of consumers who he would not grace with the term 'reading public', the other insisting that at least people were reading and who really had the right to tell them what to like? We smiled at each other with great moneyed fondness and then Julia and Ken went home to their new apartments on the river.

The summer of our success looked as if it might last forever. There was nothing much to do but watch the money come in and read the articles which never seemed to dry up. We went international. The poetry was easy to translate and the anonymous poet became well-known in over thirty countries. Different covers were created depending on the market. Abstract shapes in primary colours for southern Europe, moody monochrome shots of a person who the buyer might suppose to be the author for the northern territories. I doubted that it made any difference but we went along with the strategies.

"Have you seen the Canadian one?" said Julia, one day outside an art gallery where we had snapped up some aluminium sculptures. "I was rather pleased, it had one of my quotes on it. 'We bless ourselves and pray for rain.'"

She laughed what was meant to be a tinkling laugh and walked on towards the embankment, but what I heard was a sudden metallic screech obliterating the hum of my summer idyll. Her quote? *Her quote?*

We dined at our favourite expensive Italian that night and I struggled to control myself throughout the meal. Then, when Julia took herself off to the bathroom, Ken leant over.

"You know what she said? About *her* quote?"

I nodded and stared at him, desperate for connivance.

"Hardly *hers*." I smiled. He smiled back.

"Exactly. Exactly what I thought."

"I'm glad you spotted it too."

"Could hardly miss it. I was speechless."

Julia was on her way back. Ken looked deep into my eyes and whispered:

"I even remember where I wrote it. On the train, going to my sister's. It was last November and I would have been somewhere between London and Nuneaton." He chuckled. "I can remember it in that detail!"

I couldn't eat dessert. The food was blurred and my companions were like distant melting figures. Ken as well? Was it some kind of wind-up? I wished it was, but they were not that type. In fact,

they were clearly not my type at all. Why had I ever fallen in with them? Two opportunists who would brazenly steal any credit just because we had supposedly written this thing together.

I went home and stayed up all night, going through the volume with two highlighter pens. Apart from 'We bless ourselves and pray for rain', there were five hundred and ninety three lines (out of eight hundred and ten) which in a fair world, in a proper book where each poet was properly credited, would have been attributed to me. Did those two realise that? Did they have any idea of the proportion of the work I had done or would they try to steal the rest too?

I breathed deeply. I tried to meditate. I told myself that it was never meant to be great poetry, that our plan had been to write in the style of the more anthologised poets of the ages- Keats, Tennyson, Auden- and then give it a modern makeover. There was the unspoken premise that we were above this kind of rivalry, that we were just proving some kind of point. But now that the dish had been served on a silver platter, pride was suddenly everything and we all wanted to come out of the kitchen and take a bow. I knew that the dish was nearly all mine. The colour, the flavour: it was mine.

"No way!" screamed Julia, on the night that I could no longer resist making my claim. "No *fucking* way!"

There was a fierce exchange of views. Claims and counter-claims for specific lines were made. In the blowsy Mediterranean restaurant, where we were drinking three-figure bottles of wine and eating truffles imported that very afternoon, plates were upturned. There was scratching, kicking and eventually an amateurish fistfight between me and Ken while Julia slapped at our necks and backs. When we were exhausted and reduced to spitting at each other, the waiters swooped like a swat team and bundled us out through the restaurant garden. The chef swore in Italian as we went past the kitchen window and threw a foul-smelling carcass at us from his stock pot.

"That's it," cried Julia, as we all ran in different directions down the street. "It's coming out."

"Bloody right it is," said Ken, laughing and crying between sentences. "It bloody is. It fucking bloody is alright."

As it happened Julia got there first. She had a friend on one of the nationals and two mornings later we were exposed. Or rather Ken and I were. In this version of the story it had all been her idea and somehow she had been forced into accepting us as her conspirators even though we had barely contributed. Apparently Julia's idea had been to comment on the way that poetic fashions come and go but the moods they evoke are timeless. We had never heard this before. A day later Ken's version came out, by and large the same as Julia's but with the roles exchanged. Then I rather tiredly went to one of the papers which hadn't yet had their own exclusive and explained that I was the creative force, that Ken had been the business brains and Julia the PR expert. The rest of the media commented and then commented on each others' comments. They claimed that it had all been fishy from the start and no-

one should have been fooled into thinking that this was the work of one poet. The voice was inconsistent. And vastly derivative. They howled down the book and scorned the gullible public yet again.

But the volume kept selling for a while, albeit in decreased numbers. We continued to earn and to eat very well. We stopped meeting socially, but at various events and literary parties we would circle and stalk each other. I now despised Julia and Ken as I suspected really I had always despised them. I had nothing but contempt for their pinched, sneering faces and their never-ending attempts to re-tell and re-sell their story, to highlight their supposedly centrifugal role in the publicity phenomenon of 'Verses For The Melancholy Soul'. There have been other books from all of us but none have gone into a second print run. "It's rather like having been in The Beatles," said Julia to one reporter, a remark for which she was widely pilloried. Rightly so, though during the times in which my career seems to have vanished and only the money is a comfort, I have had the same kind of thought. Perhaps nobody can understand us apart from each other.

I hate them, my fellow authors. But one day, one of us must make the call.

Jeremy Galgut

2nd Place in the Short Story Category

2020 International Competitions - Wells Festival of Literature

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